

# Eras

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Humanities Through the Ages

## American Civil War 150th Anniversary Supplement

### Editorial

“A House Divided”: Understanding Southerners’ Dislike for Abraham Lincoln

**Darren Dobson**

“The Course Pursued by the President”: Michigan Soldiers Respond to the Emancipation Proclamation (1863)

**David P. Hopkins, Jr**

‘Burying the Shackles’: The impact of racial violence on free black labour in the Reconstructed South (1865-1877)

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# Editorial

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The American Civil War was one of the defining events that shaped the history of the United States, and the echoes of its outcome still reverberate today. Over four years, from 1861 until 1865, more than 625,000 lives were lost, over one million casualties were suffered, and few American families, black or white, remained untouched by war. As well as the devastating human cost, the war ravaged the South, leaving its infrastructure in tatters. The war, however, brought the end of the vile institution of slavery, and over four million African Americans became free.

It is with great pleasure that *Eras* brings you this special American Civil War 150th Anniversary supplement. We have three articles which, while appearing unconnected, indicate a progression of how the end of slavery shaped the thoughts and actions of Americans from both the North and the South. In our first article, Darren Dobson examines the way in which leading Southerners expressed their opposition to Abraham Lincoln's policies in the decade leading up to the outbreak of the Civil War. David Hopkins then explores how Michigan soldiers interpreted and responded to President Lincoln's Proclamation of Emancipation in 1863. And finally, Cecily Tiernan analyses how freed African Americans developed their own free labour in the former Confederate states during Reconstruction, despite vehement opposition and the very real threat of racial violence by white Southerners.

Also included are two book reviews, and we thank the publishers for the review copies of their publications.

We would like to thank the academics who agreed to act as peer reviewers and whose generosity of spirit allows this journal to continue to be a platform for post-graduate students. We hope you enjoy this supplement as much as we did in bringing it to you.

*Darren Dobson and Kathleen Shaw*

*Editors for the American Civil War 150th Anniversary Supplement*

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# “A House Divided”: Understanding Southerners’ Dislike for Abraham Lincoln

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**Abstract:** *It is important to understand the justifications for war, and the circumstances that precipitated the outbreak of the American Civil War in April 1861 are just as important today for us as they were to Americans in the mid-nineteenth century. While the past 150 years of Civil War historiography show that events such as the 1850s sectional crisis, the rise of the Northern antislavery Republican Party, the 1860 Presidential election, and the secession crisis were the major catalysts for the war, what seems to be overlooked is the anger elite Southern slaveholders experienced in anticipating that Abraham Lincoln would become their President. These prominent Southerners possessed an outright dislike for Lincoln and responded to his candidacy and eventual election with great hostility. This paper will explore why so many Southerners disliked Abraham Lincoln and why they were willing to take action that would lead to war in 1861. Specifically, this study will analyse prominent Southerners’ responses to Lincoln’s three policies of slavery’s containment, of equality, and of African American colonisation of Liberia, so as to gain a better and clearer understanding for Southern hatred of a President who has been internationally revered for more than 150 years.*

**Keywords:** *Lincoln, south, elite, dislike, sectionalism, slavery, election, equality, colonisation, abolition*

A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free...I do not expect the Union to be dissolved – I do not expect the house to fall – but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other.<sup>1</sup>

Abraham Lincoln is arguably the most well known American President and over many years he has been celebrated, most recently as a Vampire Hunter and a little more accurately as the figure largely behind the Thirteenth Amendment in Steven Spielberg’s

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\* I would like to thank my anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments

<sup>1</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “House Divided speech at Springfield, Illinois, June 16, 1858” in Roy P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume II, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 461.

*Lincoln* (2012).<sup>2</sup> However, these cross-generational representations have largely portrayed Lincoln as a hero of the oppressed, a champion for African Americans slaves. This widespread adulation often obscures the fact that there have also been many people, both during Lincoln's time and since, who have viewed him in an alternate, and often hostile, fashion. To be sure, Lincoln was an exemplary politician and man, but he was not without flaws.<sup>3</sup> Yet, what exactly was it about Lincoln that so many white Southerners feared and hated, and why was his election the catalyst that motivated them to secede? These questions reveal that Lincoln was a complicated figure, and the reasons why many leading Southerners disliked him are even more complex.

Despite Lincoln's historical stature, there has been a lack of scholarship concerning his relationship with prominent Southerners.<sup>4</sup> However, there have been some histories that have touched upon this issue including Orville Vernon Burton's *The Age of Lincoln* (2007), Harold Holzer's *Lincoln President-Elect* (2008), and John McKee Barr's *Loathing Lincoln* (2014).<sup>5</sup> Burton captures the fear that prominent Southerners felt as they came to realise that Lincoln would become their President, noting how "many slaveholders...considered" his election "to be the equivalent of a declaration of war." He also shows how this eventuality was "regarded... as a reproach to [Southern] pride" as leading Southerners believed that Lincoln's administration "would centralized the government" and "prevent the expansion of slavery."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Holzer argues that Southerners' hatred for Lincoln was centred upon "the prospect of an authentic anti-slavery man" becoming President. To elite Southerners the terms antislavery and abolition were one and the same and as such Lincoln, who was a well-established antislavery advocate as the Republican Party's Presidential nominee for the 1860

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<sup>2</sup> Seth Grahame-Smith, *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2010); Steven Spielberg, dir., *Lincoln*, (2012).

<sup>3</sup> H.W. Brands, "There Goes the South", *American History*, (April 2009), 40.

<sup>4</sup> Research conducted over the last ten years (2005-2014) into new source materials directly covering the topic of Lincoln and the South during the sectional crisis has revealed this lack of scholarship. Some of the sources consulted include: Christopher Childers, "Interpreting Popular Sovereignty: A Historiographical Essay" in *Civil War History*, volume LVII, number 1 (2011), 48-70; Jon Grinspan, "Young Men for War": The Wide Awakes and Lincoln's 1860 Presidential Campaign", in *The Journal of American History*, (September 2009), 357-378; Dennis J. Hutchinson, "Lincoln the "Dictator"", in *South Dakota Law Review*, volume 55 (2010), 284-298; Bruce Levine, "The Vital Element of the Republican Party": Antislavery, Nativism, and Abraham Lincoln", in *The Journal of the Civil War Era*, volume 1, number 4 (2011), 481-505; Michael Vorenberg, "Spielberg's Lincoln: The Great Emancipator Returns", in *The Journal of Civil War Era*, volume 3, number 4 (December 2013), 549-572; Michael E. Woods, "What Twenty-First-Century Historians Have Said about the Causes of Disunion: A Civil War Sesquicentennial Review of the Recent Literature", in *The Journal of American History*, (September 2012), 415-439.

<sup>5</sup> Orville Vernon Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Harold Holzer, *Lincoln President Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter, 1860-1861*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008); John McKee Barr, *Loathing Lincoln: An American Tradition from the Civil War to the Present*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, 105.

election, provided the justification for “many Southern radicals to raging talk of disunion.”<sup>7</sup> McKee Barr notes that Lincoln “laid the foundation for becoming the enemy of southern slaveholders” by openly “equating slavery and its possible extension with despotism, expressing uncertainty about how best to eradicate” it, and ‘supporting the voluntary colonization of slaves outside the United States.’<sup>8</sup>

McKee Barr’s investigation gets to the heart of Southern hatred for Lincoln, although he does not solely focus upon the emergence of this in the mid-1850s though to the Civil War’s beginning in 1861. His study goes further to explore how, over the 150 years since war’s end in 1865, many Southerners have continued to view the sixteenth President of the United States in a hostile manner.

This article will investigate why prominent Southerners disliked Lincoln prior to his election to the presidency and in the early months of him holding this office. I will explore the period between 1854 and the Confederate States of America’s (CSA) formation in 1861, focusing on Lincoln’s policies of slavery’s containment, equality, and colonisation. I will also analyse prominent Southerners’ responses to these policies to understand why they disliked him.<sup>9</sup> Many elite Southerners voiced their opposition to Lincoln’s policies and those whose opposition will be examined include Jefferson Davis, the Secretary of War in the Pierce administration from 1852 to 1856 and later the CSA’s President, and magazine publisher J.D.B. DeBow. The position of Joseph E. Brown, Governor of Georgia from 1857 to 1865, and of US Congressman and CSA’s Vice President Alexander Stephens will also be included. To fully understand this opposition however, a contextual overview of Lincoln and the sectional crisis is necessary.

## LINCOLN AND THE SECTIONAL CRISIS

By the mid-1850s, Lincoln pinpointed the problem facing the US, that of a divided nation operating under two competing economic and social systems of *free soil* or *free labour* in the Northern states, and *slavery* in the Southern states. The Northern free labour system allowed for any individual white American to start at the lowest rung of society and elevate themselves by their own work and ability to accumulate sufficient

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<sup>7</sup> Holzer, *Lincoln President-Elect*, 5, 152.

<sup>8</sup> McKee Barr, *Loathing Lincoln*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that the three policies of containing slavery, equality, and colonisation are not solely Lincoln’s, but were espoused as being part of the Republican Party’s 1860 Presidential Election Platform. See Horace Greely (ed.), “Resolutions 2, 7 and 8 of the Republican Party Convention, May 16, 1860, Chicago, Illinois”, *A Political Text-book for 1860: Comprising a brief view of the Presidential nominations and elections including all the national platforms ever yet adopted: also a history of the struggle respecting slavery in the territories, and of the action of Congress as to the freedom of the public lands, with the most notable speeches and letters of Messrs. Lincoln, Douglas, Bell, Cass, Seward, Everett, Breckinridge, H.V. Johnson etc., etc., touching the question of the day; and returns of all Presidential elections since 1836, (1811-1872)*, 26, located at Making of America Books accessed on 17/2/2015, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=moa;idno=ABT5872>

wealth. Lincoln explained how “The man who labored for another last year, this year labors for himself, and next year he will hire others to labor for him.”<sup>10</sup> He paid tribute to free labour saying that there was “no such thing as a freeman being fatally fixed for life, in the condition of a hired labourer” and that if this situation did occur than it was “not the fault of the system, but because of either a dependent nature which prefers it, or improvidence, folly, or singular misfortune.”<sup>11</sup> Free labour’s social hierarchy had the rich and the entrepreneurs at the top followed by business owners, free labourers, and, on the lowest rung, free blacks, who often received less pay than their white counterparts for performing the same work.

In the South during the 1850s, there was an estimated population of five million white citizens, of whom approximately three thousand owned one hundred or more slaves, while another forty-eight thousand possessed twenty or more slaves, indicating that the majority of Southern whites did not own slaves.<sup>12</sup> The large slave owners were at the head of the South’s social hierarchy as they operated large agricultural plantations and were often educated and held prominent positions in politics, law, and other professions. They were followed by those with smaller slave-holdings, and then by poor whites unable to own slaves. Typically, poor whites were uneducated, but lived with the assumption that they could advance their standing by accumulating enough assets to purchase slaves. For white Southerners, poor whites were, and would always be, viewed as superior to slaves.<sup>13</sup> US Senator, James Hammond from South Carolina defended this structure saying, “the greatest strength of the South arises from the harmony of her political and social institutions. This harmony gives her a frame of society, the best in the world, and an extent of political freedom, combined with entire security, such as no other people ever enjoyed upon the face of the earth.”<sup>14</sup>

From the earliest days of the Republic, the opposing social and economic systems co-existed and competed, leading to inevitable sectional tension between North and South.<sup>15</sup> By 1850, however, the Union was precariously balanced with fifteen free states and fifteen slave states, and sectional animosities became harder to settle. Looking to extinguish the sectional flame, prominent Southerner and national politician, James C. Calhoun from South Carolina stated that, “With us the two great divisions of society

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<sup>10</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at Kalamazoo, Michigan, August 27, 1856”, in Basler, Vol. II, 364.

<sup>11</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Address before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, September 30, 1859”, in Roy P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume III, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 478-479.

<sup>12</sup> John Keegan, *The American Civil War: A Military History*, (London: Random House, 2010), 8.

<sup>13</sup> Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederate Nation, 1861-1865*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 5-6.

<sup>14</sup> James Henry Hammond, “On the Admission of Kansas, Under the Lecompton Constitution, “Cotton is King” Speech”, United States Senate, March 4, 1858”, located at *American Civil War Documents at Sewanee: The University of the South, Tennessee*, accessed on 15/9/2015, [http://www.sewanee.edu/faculty/willis/Civil\\_War/documents/HammondCotton.html](http://www.sewanee.edu/faculty/willis/Civil_War/documents/HammondCotton.html).

<sup>15</sup> Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, 4.

are not the rich and the poor, but white and black; and all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected as equals.”<sup>16</sup>

A crucial point in the nation’s sectionalism followed the US military victory over Mexico in 1848, which resulted in new western territories coming into American possession. This raised questions about whether free soil or slavery would move into these territories and whether a sectional balance could be maintained. The need for a legal guarantee resulted in the Compromise of 1850. This admitted California to the Union as a free state, while Utah and New Mexico were to be open to slavery. The Compromise also settled dispute over the Texas-New Mexico boundary (with the federal government assuming Texas’ public debt), as well as abolishing the slave trade in Washington D.C., and establishing the Fugitive Slave Act.

Yet, despite these new agreements constitutional vagaries continued to exist over Congressional and territorial legislatures’ authority to determine the extension of slavery into the territories.<sup>17</sup> Further legislation was required to maintain the sectional balance in these territories, and so the notion of popular sovereignty, whereby the local residents of these territories could decide to allow or prohibit slavery, took hold. While the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 opened these two territories to either free soil or slavery, it also nullified the earlier Missouri Compromise of 1820 which had admitted Missouri as a slave state and prohibited slavery in those territories north of the 36° 30’ latitude line. Both Kansas and Nebraska territories were north of this geographical position and had been closed to slavery under the earlier agreement.<sup>18</sup> However, popular sovereignty, as championed by Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas, would prove elusive in Kansas, when the territory was overrun by both free soil and slavery advocates from the eastern states and election fraud was rife. The close proximity of these hostile opposing parties eventually led to open conflict, labelling the territory Bleeding Kansas.<sup>19</sup> With these events in mind, Lincoln spoke out against the Kansas-Nebraska Act:

Repeal the Missouri Compromise – repeal all compromises – repeal the Declaration of Independence – repeal all past history, you still can not repeal human nature. It

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<sup>16</sup> James C. Calhoun, “Speech on the Oregon Bill, 27 June, 1848, Washington, D.C.”, accessed on 12/9/2015, <http://cdn.constitutionreader.com/files/pdf/constitution/ch76.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> William L. Barney, *The Road to Secession: A new perspective on the Old South*, (New York: Praeger, 1972): 101; Mark E. Neely, *The Last Best Hope of Earth: Abraham Lincoln and the Promise of America*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 35, 60, 124.

<sup>18</sup> David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1976): 247; Susan-Mary Grant, *North Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 28, 48, 144.

<sup>19</sup> David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995): 203; William E. Gienapp, “The Crisis of American Democracy: The Political Systems and the Coming of the Civil War”, in Gabor S. Boritt and David W. Blight (eds.), *Why the Civil War Came*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 102-3.

still will be the abundance of man's heart, that slavery extension is wrong; and out of the abundance of his heart, his mouth will continue to speak.<sup>20</sup>

In 1857, the sectional crisis was exacerbated by the US Supreme Court's decision that ruled that the slave Dred Scott, despite being taken by his master into free states and territories could not claim freedom and American citizenship. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney stated that this ruling was opposed to black freedom and citizenship on the basis that to grant such liberties would allow them:

[T]he right to enter every other State whenever they pleased, singly or in companies, without pass or passport, and without obstruction, to sojourn there as long as they pleased, to go where they pleased at every hour of the day or night without molestation, unless they committed some violation of law for which a white man would be punished; and it would give them the full liberty of speech in public and in private upon all subjects upon which its own citizens might speak; to hold public meetings upon political affairs, and to keep and carry arms wherever they went.<sup>21</sup>

While Taney emphasised white racial superiority, the Dred Scott decision complicated matters by going beyond race as it ruled that slave-owners were free to take their property, specifically their slaves, anywhere in the country including the free states.<sup>22</sup> For many Northerners, this decision effectively opened their homes to slavery. Together with John Brown's Raid in 1859 into Virginia, the aim of which was to trigger a slave uprising, these episodes increased sectional suspicion and distrust leading up to the 1860 Presidential election. This election became a battle to determine whether free soil or slavery would prevail in the territories.

In the midst of these sectional crises, the emergence in 1854 of the new Northern antislavery Republican Party further agitated the South. The Republican Party was opposed to the expansion of slavery, with most party members being antislavery and many supporting abolition. The difference between antislavery and abolition was that supporters of antislavery wanted to stop slavery's extension while abolitionists desired slavery's complete eradication. Prominent Southerners labelled this new party the Black Republicans, as they considered it an abolitionist party. From this understanding, Southern abhorrence of the antislavery movement equalled their antipathy for Lincoln who was to become the Republican Presidential nominee for the 1860 election. Their

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<sup>20</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria, Illinois," in Basler, Vol.II: 271; Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, 113.

<sup>21</sup> US Supreme Court, "Dred Scott versus Sandford, March 6, 1857, Washington, D.C.," in Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, 84.

<sup>22</sup> Leonard L. Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 12, 199-200, 205.

intense dislike was embodied in Lincoln's "House Divided" speech in which leading Southerners believed that he committed himself to abolitionism, and led them to believe he was intent on ending slavery. This sentiment was echoed in the *Weekly Mississippian* that stated:

[T]he doctrine of the free soil [Republican] party means the total extinction of southern institutions or it means nothing. This doctrine, dangerous, revolutionary and treasonable, was proclaimed by Abraham Lincoln of Illinois briefly in these words: "I BELIEVE THIS GOVERNMENT CANNOT ENDURE PERMANENTLY HALF SLAVE AND HALF FREE."<sup>23</sup>

Hence, leading Southerners viewed Lincoln together with the Republican Party as a direct threat to their slaveholding interests.<sup>24</sup>

Although Lincoln was known within the party as a moderate on slavery, in the lead up to the 1860 Presidential election found himself being chosen as the Republican candidate over more prominent antislavery and party heavyweights such as Salmon P. Chase from Ohio and William H. Seward of New York.<sup>25</sup> Lincoln ran for President against a divided Democratic Party whose candidates were Northern Democrat Stephen A. Douglas and Southern Democrat John C. Breckinridge, as well as the Constitutional Unionist John Bell.<sup>26</sup> The election was a series of ballots conducted across different days and weeks in the various states and counties. While none of these presidential nominees were able to run election campaigns across the entire country, Lincoln and Douglas in particular were significantly obstructed due to Southern sectionalism. Douglas actually ventured into the South, but became aware that he was most likely to be defeated as secessionist sentiment was so strong.<sup>27</sup>

Although Lincoln did not actively campaign in the South he was still prevented from acquiring votes there, due to many Southern electorates colour-coding the secret ballots that identified the Republican Party ticket. To be in possession of a Republican ballot would likely have seen the individual voter meet with hostility from his neighbours who openly opposed Lincoln. Another obstacle Lincoln encountered was the voting requirement in Virginia and Kentucky that obliged voters to publically declare for

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23 The *Weekly Mississippian*, "March 20, 1860", in Donald E. Reynolds, Editors Make War: *Southern Newspapers in the Secession Crisis*, (Carbondale: Southern University Press, 2006), 23.

24 McKee Barr, *Loathing Lincoln*, 7; Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 200-203.

25 James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 217-218.

26 Richard Sewell, *A House Divided: Sectionalism and the Civil War, 1848-1865*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 75; Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 276.

27 David Goldfield, *America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011), 171.

whom they intended to vote, while in South Carolina it was the state legislature and not the local populace who decided the election outcome. Not only did Lincoln have to contend with all of these hurdles, but he also faced total obstruction in nine Southern states where he was not even on the ballot. Yet, when the final results for the 1860 Presidential election were released on November 6, all of these handicaps failed to bring about the Republicans and Lincoln's defeat.<sup>28</sup> Lincoln was also able to claim victory by winning nearly every Northern state, with the exception of New Jersey.<sup>29</sup> Many Southerners, however, protested against Lincoln's victory and declared that they did not want him as their President. Jack Campbell of Marshall, Texas, noticed one such example of Southern protest the morning after Lincoln's victory, saying that; "last night [it] rained and hailed...yet it seemed somebody was not afraid of the storms for on my arrival in the public square this morning the first object that greeted my eyes was a figure or manikin hanging by the neck to a regularly constructed gallows...eyes bandaged and labeled on the breast Abraham Lincoln."<sup>30</sup>

Jefferson Davis summed up this feeling of hatred for Lincoln, stating that the new President "was nothing save as he was the representative of opinions, of a policy, of purpose, of power to inflict upon us those wrongs to which freemen never tamely submit."<sup>31</sup> Feeling justified that secession was now their only choice, states in the Deep South, including South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and Texas, seceded. Within three months these states formed the CSA, which boasted a Constitution based on the US model that included slavery, and established a capital in Montgomery, Alabama.<sup>32</sup>

These measures totally disregarded the fact that Lincoln, who was not yet inaugurated as President, held no power to do anything until his inauguration on March 4, 1861.<sup>33</sup> As President-elect there was no way that Lincoln could abuse presidential power. During this time, Lincoln remained publicly silent on the issue, instead reiterating through personal correspondence that Southerners "need only to" acquaint themselves with the Republican Party platform and his speeches as all was "in print and easy of access."<sup>34</sup> Within the context of the sectional crisis, Lincoln became a key figure,

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<sup>28</sup> Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, 103

<sup>29</sup> Neely, *The Last Best Hope of Earth*, 59.

<sup>30</sup> Jack Campbell, "Letter to friend, Marshall Texas January 24, 1861", in John McKee Barr, *Loathing Lincoln: An American Tradition from the Civil War to the Present*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), 26-27.

<sup>31</sup> Jefferson Davis, "Remarks on the Special Message on Affairs in South Carolina, January 10, 1861", in John McKee Barr, *Loathing Lincoln: An American Tradition from the Civil War to the Present*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), 23.

<sup>32</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 234; & Keegan, *The American Civil War*, 32.

<sup>33</sup> Goldfield, *America Aflame*, 199.

<sup>34</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Letter to John A. Gilmer, Springfield, Illinois, December 15, 1860", Roy P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume IV, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 151-153.

and his advocacy for containing slavery, for equality, and for colonisation were three prominent areas that made impacts in both sections and elevated him within national consciousness. This study will now explore these policies and examine how prominent Southerners responded.

### SLAVERY'S CONTAINMENT

Lincoln championed slavery's containment in the belief that it needed to be restricted to those states where it was already a functioning system and entwined with the social and economic structures. He envisaged that slavery was not to impede the US's self-government under free democratic institutions, stating that:

on the spread of slavery, I can not but hate. I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself...it deprives our republican example...enables the enemies of free institutions...causes the real friends of freedom to doubt over sincerity, and especially because it forces so many really good men...into open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty.<sup>35</sup>

Lincoln argued that slavery's containment was desired from the nation's formation, saying that there existed "evidence sufficient to [his] mind, that the fathers of this Government placed that institution where the public mind *did* rest in the belief that it was in the course of ultimate extinction."<sup>36</sup> The specific evidence Lincoln referred to was the old Northwest Ordinance of 1787 through which the founding fathers had forbidden the extension of slavery into these north-western territories.<sup>37</sup> For Lincoln, this ruling signified the founders' desire to prohibit slavery from extending into any new American territories while also reflecting their wish that it would eventually cease to exist if it was bound to its original states. Lincoln could not abide slavery's potential expansion beyond the slave states and was infuriated with the Kansas-Nebraska Act's passage announcing, "I think...that it is wrong; wrong in its direct effect, letting slavery into Kansas and Nebraska – and wrong in its prospective principle, allowing it to spread to every other part of the wide world, where men can be found inclined to take it."<sup>38</sup>

Not surprisingly many prominent Southerners were hostile to slavery being contained, and expected that once Lincoln became President he would exclude slavery

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<sup>35</sup> Barney, *The Road to Secession*, 130; Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria, Illinois", 255.

<sup>36</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Seventh and Last Debate with Stephen A. Douglas at Alton, Illinois, October 15, 1858", in *Basler*, Vol. III, 306.

<sup>37</sup> For a more detailed explanation by Abraham Lincoln on the founding fathers intentions see "Address at Cooper Institute, New York City, February 27, 1860", in *Basler*, Vol. III, 522-550; Richards, *The Slave Power*, 159; Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, (London: Papermac, 2000), 58, 86-91.

<sup>38</sup> Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria, Illinois", 255.

from the territories, terminate the interstate slave trade, and repeal or modify the FSA.<sup>39</sup> Lincoln's containment policy was equated with being restricted to their existing areas, and that would in turn result in the over use of agricultural lands and a rapidly increasing black population. This scenario would see the existing slave system pushed into oblivion, as economic profits would decline with negative impact upon those non-slaveholding whites who would struggle to find employment due to competition with slaves.<sup>40</sup> For the elite Southerners, the policy of containment would result in not only slavery's death, but also the complete demise of their way of life. Following Lincoln's election victory, the *Southern Literacy Messenger* anticipated that "the last hours of the United States of America" would come about due to "the election to the Presidency of a candidate pledged to the ultimate extinction of a domestic institution which is the foundation stone of southern society."<sup>41</sup>

Elite Southerners were further opposed to the containment of slavery, insisting that their most cherished privilege under republican liberty was property ownership, in particular owning slaves, with the right to transport these chattels anywhere in the nation.<sup>42</sup> On February 2, 1860, Jefferson Davis, then a Senator from Mississippi, responded to Lincoln's idea of containing slavery, by presenting resolutions to the US Senate stipulating that neither Congress nor a territorial legislature could "impair the constitutional right of any citizen of the United States to take his slave property into the common territories...It is the duty of the federal government there to afford, for that as for other species of property, the needful protection."<sup>43</sup>

Prominent Southerners also saw containment as subverting States' Rights whereby state laws held absolute authority over slavery and how it operated. They argued that this principle had protection under Article IV Section II of the Constitution whereby "The citizens of each state shall be entitled to all the privileges and immunities of citizens of the several states."<sup>44</sup> Leading Southerners interpreted their states' original

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<sup>39</sup> Neely, *The Last Best Hope of Earth*, 59-62; Sewell, *A House Divided*, 77-78.

<sup>40</sup> Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, 116.

<sup>41</sup> "Editors Table", *Southern Literacy Messenger*, (Volume 31 December 1860), in David Goldfield, *America Aflame*, 181.

<sup>42</sup> Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The South and Three Sectional Crises*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 26; James M. McPherson, "Southern Exceptionalism: A New Look at an Old Question", in Michael Perman (ed.), *The Coming of the American Civil War*, Third Edition, (Lexington: Massachusetts, D.C. Heath, 1993), 193-194.

<sup>43</sup> Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, 122; Keegan, *The American Civil War*, 30; Jefferson Davis, "Resolution presented to the United States Senate, Washington D.C., February 2, 1860", *Congressional Globe, 36th Congress, 1st session 1860*, Volume I, 658, A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774 – 1875, located at the *Library of Congress*, accessed on 12/9/2015, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llcg&fileName=051/llcg051.db&recNum=735>

<sup>44</sup> Constitution of the United States of America, "Article IV Section II", in Paul S. Boyer, Clifford E. Clark, Jr., Sandra McNair Hawley, Joseph F. Kent, Neal Salisbury, Harvard Sitkoff, and Nancy Woloch, *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People, Volume One: To 1877*, Concise Fifth Edition, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), A-9.

ratification of the Constitution as guaranteeing state autonomy in return for allowing limited federal authority. Thus, within States' Rights, the elite saw Lincoln's justification of his containment policy under the old North-West Ordinance to be a mute point because the Constitution superseded this earlier legislation. It was further posited that by stopping slavery's expansion Lincoln wanted to violate the Constitution.<sup>45</sup>

### EQUALITY

Lincoln viewed slavery as violating both whites' and blacks' equality as he believed that African Americans were human beings, and that poor Southern whites' treasured social tenant of slave ownership assuring their social elevation denied their full equality. Fuelled by his belief in the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln expressed his vision for equality in the US, denouncing slavery and the slaveholder:

Near eighty years ago we began by declaring that all men are created equal; but now from that beginning we have run down to the other declaration, that for SOME men to enslave OTHERS is a 'sacred right of self government.'<sup>46</sup>

Yet, while on the surface this might appear to be about racial equality, what Lincoln meant was equality of opportunity, with blacks and poor whites given the opportunity to realise their own democratic liberties.<sup>47</sup>

While Lincoln argued for equality, however, he did not hold that the races were socially equal.<sup>48</sup> Lincoln believed in black racial inferiority, stipulating that he did not desire "the establishment of political equality between whites and blacks." He enunciated that there existed "a physical difference between the two" races that would always prohibit them from "living together upon the footing of perfect equality." In the event that slaves were freed Lincoln believed "that there must be a difference" marking each race as separate and that he favoured "the race to which I belong, having the superior position."<sup>49</sup> Lincoln saw the Dred Scott ruling as preventing blacks obtaining equality as it denied them citizenship based on their African descent.<sup>50</sup> This decision

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<sup>45</sup> Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 471-479 & 482.

<sup>46</sup> Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria, Illinois", 275.

<sup>47</sup> Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, 111.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "First Debate with Stephen A. Douglas at Ottawa, Illinois, August 21, 1858", in Basler, Vol. III, 16; Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 342-343, 348.

<sup>50</sup> Neely, *The Last Best Hope of Earth*, 38 & 48.

ruled that slaves were property who lacked reason, conscience, affections, sympathies and hope.<sup>51</sup>

For Lincoln black enslavement corrupted whites and left the South inferior to the North.<sup>52</sup> This contrasted with the Southern notion that manual labour performed by whites was abhorrent and if whites performed such menial work it would degrade their racial superiority. Lincoln challenged the South's concept of physical work, asking, "What is the true condition of the labourer?" He argued that poor whites' view of labour as beneath them and fit for slaves reduced them to a life of perpetual poverty. Their condition could only be improved by the introduction of free labour because under this system "*laborers CAN strike* when they want to...are not obliged to work under all circumstances, and are not tied down and obliged to labor whether you pay him or not!" Lincoln explained that he preferred this 'system which lets a man quit when he wants to, and wish it might prevail everywhere.'<sup>53</sup> He believed that opening the South to free labour would increase these states' prosperity as well as enable poor whites to realise their equality.<sup>54</sup> Instead of inequality Lincoln preferred that all people, black and white, have an equal opportunity via their own work to realise the benefits of their labour.<sup>55</sup>

In response to Lincoln's equality, or what was perceived in the South as racial equality, Southern elites also targeted poor whites by justifying the slave system with white superiority. This was because the South's leaders relied on the loyalty of lower socio-economic whites to ensure their continued own higher social status. For these elites, democracy combined with a prosperous plantation economy insulated the planter class. Their social and political position was maintained, which in no small part reinforced the notion that all southern white males were lords of their domain.<sup>56</sup> They further argued that by instituting racial equality, Lincoln wanted to reduce all Southern whites to the same standing as blacks. On November 7, 1860, the day after Lincoln's election victory, Georgia's Governor Joseph E. Brown, defended the South by stating that only through slavery could "the poor white labourer" be "respected as an equal" as they did not "belong to the menial class" because the "negro is in no sense of the term his equal." Brown argued that poor whites belonged "to the only true aristocracy, the race of *white men*" and would "never permit the slaves of the South to be set free among

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<sup>51</sup> Henry Wilson, "The History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America", Volumes I and II, in Michael Perman (ed.), *The Coming of the American Civil War*, Third Edition, (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath, 1993), 8.

<sup>52</sup> Reinhard H. Luthin, *The First Lincoln Campaign*, (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1964), 18.

<sup>53</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Speech at New Haven, Connecticut, March 6, 1860", in *Basler*, Vol. IV, 24.

<sup>54</sup> Barney, *The Road to Secession*, 28; Neely, *The Last Best Hope of Earth*, 126.

<sup>55</sup> Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, 84.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

them” as they were aware that “abolition of slavery” would result in them being the “greater sufferers” unable “to protect themselves.”<sup>57</sup>

Due to their close knit rural communities, Southern whites had for generations developed a comradeship that stretched across socio-economic lines, and had shared in exchanges of ideas at public and private gatherings that included barbeques and church attendances. This social interaction meant that both elite Southerners and poorer non-slaveholding whites were expected to display respect for each other, which was supported by the belief that poor whites’ independence was founded upon slavery providing economic advancement and black racial inferiority.<sup>58</sup> Using this as a counter argument to Lincoln’s equality, J.D.B. DeBow said; “The non-slaveholder of the South preserves that status of the white man, and is not regarded as an inferior or dependent. He is not told that the Declaration of Independence, where it says that all men are born free and equal, refers to the negro equality with himself.”<sup>59</sup> This white Southern understanding of Lincoln’s equality was strongly tied into fears that under his presidency the free soil system would invade the South, and force poor whites into job competition with emancipated slaves. Given this rhetoric, there was little chance that poor whites would abandon their freedoms to Lincoln’s equality, especially when they preferred slavery’s promise of an ordered society within which they could advance, and where all menial work was considered slave labour.<sup>60</sup>

### AFRICAN AMERICAN COLONISATION

Like many of his Southern critics, Lincoln also recognised that instituting equality between whites and blacks would raise the question of what to do with large numbers of emancipated African Americans. There were very few white Americans, North or South, who wanted to live in a country where black people held equal citizenship.<sup>61</sup> Given this paradigm, Lincoln supported the notion of colonisation, which was a concept that had already become a reality and had resulted in some blacks being repatriated to Africa. While it was not a new idea, Lincoln nevertheless proposed “to free all of the slaves and send them to Liberia – to their own land.”<sup>62</sup> He was aware that freed slaves remaining in the US would flood the employment market and be paid for their labour

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<sup>57</sup> Joseph E. Brown, “Special Message of Governor Joseph E. Brown to Senate and House of Representatives, Executive Department, Milledgeville, Georgia, November 7, 1860”, Allen D. Candler (ed.), *The Confederate Records of the State of Georgia*, Volume I, (Atlanta: C.P. Byrd, State printer, 1909), 55-56, located at *American Libraries*, accessed on 19/9/2015, <https://archive.org/details/confederatereco02assegoog>

<sup>58</sup> Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, 38.

<sup>59</sup> J. D. B. DeBow, “The Non-Slaveholders of the South”, in Michael Perman (ed.), *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction*, Second Edition, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 9.

<sup>60</sup> Barney, *The Road to Secession*, xv-4, 38, 70, 170; Boyer et al., *The Enduring Vision*, 288.

<sup>61</sup> Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, 42.

<sup>62</sup> Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 344-345; & Lincoln, “Speech at Peoria, Illinois”, 255.

at cheaper wages than poor Southern whites. This situation would leave many non-slaveholding Southerners unemployed or paid less as they competed for jobs with freed blacks, something that was a reality for many white Northern labourers.<sup>63</sup>

Lincoln recognised the need to end slavery “without producing a greater evil, even to the cause of human liberty itself”, and he posited that colonisation would free the country “from the dangerous presence of slavery...in restoring a captive people to their long-lost father-land with bright prospects for the future.”<sup>64</sup> On these grounds, returning blacks to Africa was deemed necessary, as it would open the South to free labour while also providing the US with financial benefits from these colonies as ex-slaves would remain loyal, form an economic partnership, and carry back American civilization, religion, law, and liberty to these regions.<sup>65</sup> Colonisation would also eliminate slavery’s expansion into the western territories and provide both races with peaceful separation and their own domains.<sup>66</sup>

However, there were concerns that racial separation would destroy Southern society. Colonisation produced an acute level of distress among large slaveholders who feared that if this plan was to come to fruition they would become the national minority, surrounded and threatened by free labour states and territories. For leading Southerners, Lincoln embodied all the Northern ill will and hurt that the South would be forced to endure if they accepted him as their President. They held Lincoln to be the cause of their eventual secession, because it was Lincoln who advocated for emancipation and for colonisation, which in turn threatened the South’s traditional social order.<sup>67</sup> With the CSA’s creation in 1861, Vice-President Alexander Stephens rebuffed Lincoln’s plans for colonisation and racial separation. For Southerners such as Stephens, slavery’s importance to the South meant:

Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery...is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first in the history of the world based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Neely, *The Last Best Hope of Earth*, 42

<sup>64</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Eulogy on Henry Clay, Honors to Henry Clay, July 6, 1852”, in Basler, Vol. II, 130-132.

<sup>65</sup> Luthin, *The First Lincoln Campaign*, 53-54.

<sup>66</sup> Barney, *The Road to Secession*, 54-55, 78, 125.

<sup>67</sup> McKee Bar, *Loathing Lincoln*, 24, 30-31.

<sup>68</sup> Alexander Stephens, “Cornerstone Speech, Montgomery, Alabama, March 21, 1861”, located at *Modern History Source Book*, Fordham University, accessed on 12/9/2015, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1861stephens.asp>

White Southerners held great pride in maintaining this cornerstone as it enabled them to enjoy freedom and equality. Slavery bound the elite and poor Southern whites together by allowing for a sense of community and way of life predicated upon their racial superiority. This was a society that would be destroyed if slaves were to be removed to Africa.<sup>69</sup>

They also believed that slavery was benevolent, in that slaves were kindly cared for and educated towards being worthy of civilization.<sup>70</sup> This was a process that showed the importance and relevance of maintaining the close ties of master and slave. Colonisation would be tantamount to excluding blacks from what it meant to be racially uplifted. Leading Southerners posited that this master-slave relationship was one of paternalism and as such displayed that slavery was beneficial for the entire nation. Elite Southerners benefited because this system allowed them to gain a higher sense of duty towards their inferiors that was subsequently passed along to non-slaveholding Southerners and Northerners. Confederate President Jefferson Davis expressed how slavery allowed whites as the ‘superior race’ to transform “brutal savages into docile, intelligent, and civilized agricultural laborers.” He also argued that it was Northerners such as Lincoln who had driven “the people of Southern States” to adopt a “course of action to avert danger with which they were openly menaced.”<sup>71</sup> By returning blacks to Africa, white Americans were allowing slaves to revert to their former barbaric and animal like condition. Only by remaining in the US as slaves could they ever become civilized, as it was slaveholders who cared and educated them towards this goal. Yet, such paternalism was not based upon white kindness and black acceptance; it was predicated upon violence derived from white-held moral values of right and wrong.<sup>72</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Lincoln’s position, as evident through the three policies of slavery’s containment, of equality, and of colonisation, was informed by free labour and social mobility. For him the real issue confronting Americans was class and not race. In fact, his promotion of these policies all originated from his concern for lower-class whites’ interests and their social improvement rather than what was best for blacks. Yet, there is no doubt that many Southerners disliked Lincoln during the sectional crisis and following the 1860 Presidential elections. While at first their hatred could be attributed to Lincoln being a Republican, where Southern understandings of

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<sup>69</sup> Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, 38.

<sup>70</sup> Sewell, *A House Divided*, 12-13, 18, 79.

<sup>71</sup> Jefferson Davis, “President Jefferson Davis Address to the Congress of Confederate States of America, Montgomery, Alabama, April 29, 1861”, in James D. Richardson (ed.), *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Confederacy*, Volume I, (Nashville: US Publishing, 1905), 67.

<sup>72</sup> Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, 40-41.

this party meant that the South's way of life was in jeopardy, this study has revealed that elite Southerners loathed Lincoln for more than his political affiliation.

The main point of contention was over Lincoln's desire to contain slavery to those states where it existed. The battle over slavery entering the territories was not solely about States' Rights but about the elite Southern slaveholders realising greater wealth while maintaining their dominant social standing both in the South and nationally. Lincoln's call for slavery's containment and eventual demise represented the real reason for why many Southerners disliked him. For Southerners, this notion said that slavery would end in the slave states, and it presented the possibility that the Southern way of life would disappear.

Lincoln is most misunderstood when it came to equality. Rather than racial equality, he actually espoused equality of opportunity for both white and black. This idea promoted an ambiguity that led to prominent Southerners to ignore the fact that Lincoln did not consider whites and blacks equal: rather, he held the same opinion as his Southern detractors in that they both believed in white racial superiority. However, it was the challenge that equality presented to their racial superiority that worried many Southerners, regardless of their social standing. Elite Southerners were able to tap into this fear to convince others to oppose Lincoln. Even poor whites could one day manage to own slaves, as it was through this type of property that they would climb up the social ladder. This understanding reinforced slavery's importance to white Southerners and that for as long as it existed they would always be superior to blacks.

Colonisation highlights the fact that Lincoln was more concerned about preserving white racial superiority by not wanting emancipated slaves continuing to live the US. Yet, promoting colonisation as a solution would institute a separation of the races that for prominent white Southerners would jeopardise their elite social status, result in property loss and interfere with state institutions.

Southern leaders disliked Lincoln because he endangered the continuation of slave agriculture, proposed the end of white racial supremacy, and was determined to emancipate their slaves. Yet, while this was their perspective, one wonders just what exactly Lincoln could have done that would have ensured that both sections would be satisfied? In short, most likely nothing, as Lincoln was trying to find a way that would appease both sections, but the diametrically opposing positions held by many Northerners and Southerners meant that misunderstanding and inability to compromise prevailed. As it was, Lincoln's advocacy of slavery's containment, equality, and colonisation, explains not only why prominent Southerners disliked him, but also the origins of many of the difficulties the US faced at the end of the 1850s. While war is never inevitable, the gulf between the sections in 1861 would plunge the nation into

four years of bloody conflict claiming the lives of approximately 750,000 Americans.<sup>73</sup> Lincoln was indeed prophetic; a house divided against itself could not stand.

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<sup>73</sup> Guy Gugliotta, "New Estimate Raises Civil War Death Toll, April 2, 2012", New York Times, accessed May 22, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/03/science/civil-war-toll-up-by-20-percent-in-new-estimate.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/03/science/civil-war-toll-up-by-20-percent-in-new-estimate.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

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# “The Course Pursued by the President”: Michigan Soldiers Respond to the Emancipation Proclamation (1863)

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**Abstract.** *American President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation (1863) changed the Union Army’s original goals in the American Civil War (1861-1863). What had previously been a war to preserve the Union became a war for the freedom of millions of African Americans held in bondage throughout the Confederacy. Union soldiers reacted differently to Lincoln’s Proclamation. Soldiers serving from the state of Michigan were no different. Michigan was not a fervently abolitionist state, as many citizens shared hostile views towards African Americans. The inclusion of slaves’ freedom as a war goal as well as allowing them to participate in the war effort caused many Michigan men to write home sharing their views of this policy change. While few soldiers favoured the Proclamation, many of those who were opposed changed their opinions as the war progressed. This change of heart demonstrated that these soldiers realised slavery was the root cause of the war and ending slavery would end the war.*

**Keywords:** *American Civil War, Emancipation Proclamation, Michigan, slavery, freedom, African American, abolition*

The Emancipation Proclamation (1863) expanded the goals of the Union war effort to include the freedom of African Americans, beginning in September 1862 with the preliminary version, and produced varied reactions from Michigan soldiers.<sup>1</sup> This article traces Michigan soldiers’ opinions concerning the Proclamation. Many Michigan soldiers charted reactions from outright disgust to expressions of pragmatic support for the Proclamation; other soldiers expressed neither support nor contempt

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<sup>1</sup> Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation came in four stages: a first draft (July 22, 1862), the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation (September 22, 1862), a final draft (December 29-31, 1862), and the final Emancipation Proclamation (January 1, 1863). The final draft removed all provisions for gradual, compensated emancipation and it provided for the full enlistment of African Americans into the Union Army. See Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 253-260.

towards the Proclamation. Some agreed with the Proclamation, as they felt that it would hasten the war's end, while others were against the edict because it went against the very reasons they enlisted in the Union Army – the preservation of the Union.

Michigan troops' negative reactions to the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation can be broken down into three categories. Firstly, soldiers believed that the edict was unenforceable, as it applied to areas that were in rebellion and not under Federal control. There were soldiers who failed to see how the Proclamation tied into the North's successes would have the result of expanding freedom as the army achieved victories in the field. Secondly, with constant rumours in military camps about the war nearing an end, soldiers thought the war could be finished without the need for emancipation, essentially preserving the Union as it had been before the war. Many Michigan troops maintained the desire for the status quo antebellum era and they made this known in their letters and diaries on multiple occasions. Thirdly, the soldiers viewed Proclamation as lending an air of desperation to the Lincoln administration.

Previous historical scholarship touches on the Proclamation and its many repercussions during the American Civil War (1861-1865), however, it fails to consider white northern soldiers' attitudes regarding President Abraham Lincoln's expansion of the Union's war goals.<sup>2</sup> In short, a more detailed study of soldiers' reactions to the Proclamation as a part of the Union war effort requires further exploration. Using Michigan soldiers as a sample, this article demonstrates the ways in which these soldiers interpreted the Proclamation and its consequences for their Civil War.

The research presented here utilises the letters, diaries, and journals of forty-three Michigan soldiers from various regiments, serving in different theatres of the war. There were soldiers who reacted immediately to the preliminary Proclamation, the final Proclamation, or both. Likewise, there were also Michigan soldiers who did not immediately respond to the edict. These soldiers described the Proclamation in hindsight, as they realised how it aided the Union in the final two years of the war.

Historian James M. McPherson found evidence of soldiers who felt betrayed by Lincoln and his administration with the Proclamation. Further, he argues that this document "intensified a morale crisis" because it was so divisive as it "provoked a new level of consciousness about the relationship of slavery to the war."<sup>3</sup> Other soldiers

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the evolution of Lincoln's emancipation policy, see Harold Holzer, Edna Greene Medford, and Frank J. Williams, *The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); William K. Klingaman, *Abraham Lincoln and the Road to Emancipation, 1861-1865* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001); Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004). For more on the impact of this emancipation policy on Union troops, see Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> James M. McPherson, *What They Fought For, 1861-1865*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 62.

gave it only a passing mention and said nothing else for the remainder of the war. Michigan troops' letters and diaries reveal an increased awareness of the Proclamation's consequences amongst the soldiers. Further research into Michigan soldiers' responses to the Proclamation highlights McPherson's question: "why do men fight?" Many historians have addressed this question, but have placed varying importance on the role of the Emancipation Proclamation with regard to Union soldiers and their motivations to fight. So many works concerning the Emancipation Proclamation and Union soldiers tend to view its impact on the Union Army as a whole. A comprehensive breakdown of reactions by state could expose variations to soldiers' reactions, some of which may be state specific.

During the Civil War, the Midwest was a very different place from abolitionist New England. Historian Jacque Voegeli argued that "except for the South, the Middle West – Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota – was the region most firmly committed to white supremacy."<sup>4</sup> If this were true, then many men serving in Midwestern regiments should have opposed emancipation in all forms. Opposition to emancipation here sprouted from the influx of European immigrants during this time to the Midwest, namely German and Irish Catholics, as well as emigrants from the lower North including southern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.<sup>5</sup> Many were supporters of the Democratic Party and its members generally opposed the Emancipation Proclamation. Voegeli and fellow historian Frank L. Klement describe this Democratic opposition to emancipation in their studies of Midwestern politics during the Civil War. These studies, however, do not include Michigan.

From the start of the Civil War, many men from Michigan enlisted in the army to preserve the Union, not to fight for the abolition of slavery. Michigan citizens made their opinion known before Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in late 1862. Hiram F. Covey's letter home to Waverly, Michigan, in the summer of 1862, less than two months before Lincoln's public announcement of this document, provided his reasons for enlisting. Covey, who fought in both the 40<sup>th</sup> New York and the 13<sup>th</sup> Michigan infantry regiments, felt that "the war was not get up to putt down slavery, but to preserve the union, and to putt down treason traters and that the star spangled baner might triumphantly wave over the land of the free and the home of the brave."<sup>6</sup> Covey made it quite clear that he did not enlist in the army to fight for emancipation but to preserve the Union. Many Union soldiers shared Covey's position, particularly during the war's first two years. Party politics played a key role

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<sup>4</sup> V. Jacque Voegeli, *Free But Not Equal: The Midwest and the Negro During the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 1.

<sup>5</sup> This breakdown of Midwestern opposition can be found in Frank L. Klement, "Midwestern Opposition to Lincoln's Emancipation Policy," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 49, No. 3, (July, 1964): 170-171.

<sup>6</sup> Hiram F. Covey to Rosannah [sic] and all, August 1, 1862, *Rosanna Covey Hulbert Papers, 1861-1865*, Bentley Historical Library, the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor (henceforth: BHL, UM).

in shaping the individual interpretations of the Proclamation, which in turn influenced soldiers' opinions of this edict.

Michigan, as well as the rest of the North, cared about politics during the mid-nineteenth century. Historian Phillip Shaw Paludan has noted that more than “75 percent of the eligible voters voted in the presidential elections of 1848-72. . . . Michigan voter turnout between 1854 and 1872 was almost 85 percent.”<sup>7</sup> In particular, the emancipation issue caused quite a stir among soldiers with Democratic affiliations. Benjamin B. Brock, initially a Republican serving in the 26<sup>th</sup> Michigan Infantry, discussed wartime politics in early February 1863: “i am A stiff dimocrat and i never Will vote a nother RepuBlican in my life a gain And i want to tell them RepuBlican that they Never would vote that ticket A gain.”<sup>8</sup> The Emancipation Proclamation increased Brock's dislike for Republican Party because they had strayed from their statements made earlier in the war, namely *status quo antebellum*. Brock continued, “I wish that i had listen To you Before I had enlisted...i did not think When i Enlisted that i was a goin to fight for the negro But when i get hear i found out that i Was agoin to fight i jest turned my coat.”<sup>9</sup> Brock's statement, written after the final Proclamation's release, demonstrates Northern Democratic troops' resentment toward the both this document and emancipation. According to Klement, Democrat soldiers often launched “attack[s] upon ‘the fell spirit of abolition’” and were often labelled as Copperheads, peace Democrats and butternuts by Republicans.<sup>10</sup> Despite the various labels placed on Northern Democrats by Republicans during the war, it is important to remember that both fought to save the Union. The Proclamation proved to be a divisive political issue and caused men like Brock to switch party affiliation. Brock, the “stiff dimocrat” of the 26<sup>th</sup> Michigan Infantry, wrote: “I am a democrat i used to be what they called republicans, but i have seen So much of the president and dark colored hats that it made me sick to my stomach and I thought it was time to bolt.”<sup>11</sup>

The Proclamation pushed Brock's party loyalty to the brink and caused him to break ties with the Republicans. Soldiers who opposed the Proclamation needed a target on which to direct their anger and abolitionists received much of the blame. Placing the blame on abolitionists was common amongst Northern soldiers. Edward Taylor, still angry over the replacement of General George B. McClellan as head of the Army of the Potomac, wrote in January 1863: “The treachery of fanaticism, the base

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<sup>7</sup> Phillip Shaw Paludan, *A People's Contest: The Union & Civil War, 1861-1865*, Second Edition. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1996), 11.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin B. Brock to “My Dear Wife,” February 3, 1863, *Benjamin B. Brock Letters, 1861-1865*, University Archives & Historical Collections of Michigan State University-East Lansing (henceforth: UAHC, MSU).

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Frank L. Klement, *Lincoln's Critics: The Copperheads of the North* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Books, 1999), 112.

<sup>11</sup> Brock to “My Dear Wife,” February 3, 1863.

perversion of justice in those who rule - - our Patriae - - Freedom, Justice and Liberty are dethroned and a snake-haried fury reigns in her place; her name is Abolition.”<sup>12</sup> For Taylor, abolition corrupted the government and a radical element fought the war in a way that was against everything that men like him had enlisted to preserve.

Echoing Taylor’s sentiments, James Sligh, who was a physician and officer in the Michigan Engineers and Mechanics, wrote that “the soldiers down here are disgusted with the way the northern Abolitionists & other politicians are going in up North. They feel like about facing and clearing out the ranks.”<sup>13</sup> Building on this negative view of abolitionists, Charles H. Church of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Michigan Volunteers also wrote “The principles that we have to fight for now are to black for anyone to come out for...but we poor cuses do not want to stay out here in the field as targets & instruments for the Black Abolition party & that rotten congress any longer than possible.”<sup>14</sup> For these soldiers, the Proclamation was abolition at its most extreme, endangering the war effort. These men failed to see the edict’s long-term goals and its effect beyond the emancipation of African Americans.

Michigan soldiers who expressed negative opinions of the Emancipation Proclamation did so because they viewed it as a demonstration of Lincoln’s weakness. Soldiers attributed this weakness to the perceived impression that Lincoln, with the Proclamation, gave in to abolitionists’ demands for emancipation. Rohloff C. Hacker wrote from a hospital in New York less than a week after Lincoln issued the preliminary Proclamation that “the Presidents ‘emancipation proclamation’ is unqualifiedly condemned here by the Soldier – allmost all discountenance [?] it & as untimely & useless; besides sharing a weakness in the Administration.”<sup>15</sup> While Edward Taylor criticised the Proclamation as “being of no force,” Hacker viewed it as a sign of weakness in the Lincoln administration as he considered that it went too far and that the policy was unenforceable.

However, not all soldiers viewed the Proclamation in this way as some had long thought that the government had not gone far enough in promoting the end of slavery as a war goal. Writing from Lexington, Kentucky, Phineas A. Hager of the 19<sup>th</sup> Michigan Infantry supported Lincoln’s war measure in its preliminary form, but wanted the government to eliminate slavery. He said in a letter to his wife on November 6, 1862, “I am still of the opinion in regard to the termination of the war, that I have ever been,” and that, “it will close when the government shall have destroyed the monster slavery, and acknowledge that in doing it, they are governed by

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Taylor to Bill, January 25, 1863, microfilm edition, *Edward Henry Courtney Taylor Correspondence, 1860-1864*, BHL, UM.

<sup>13</sup> James Sligh to Mother, February 9, 1863, microfilm edition, *Sligh Family Papers, 1845-1865*, BHL, UM.

<sup>14</sup> Charles H. Church, *Civil War Letters* (Rose City, MI: Rose City Historical Society, 1987), 32. This excerpt comes from a February 24, 1863, letter to his parents.

<sup>15</sup> Rohloff C. Hacker to Barbara Woll, Serena, & Theodore Hacker, September 27, 1862, *Schoff Collection: Hacker Brothers Papers, 1861-1866*, William L. Clements Library, the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor (henceforth: WCL, UM).

something more than a mere military necessity.”<sup>16</sup> Hager wanted the government to take a higher moral stance with regard to slavery by destroying the institution throughout the nation. He viewed slavery as the root cause of the war and its destruction would be the death knell for the rebellion stating that “It does seem strange that with all the power which the general government has at its command, that so little is being accomplished.”<sup>17</sup> For Hager, the Lincoln administration restricted its full military might which in turn prolonged the war. Viewing slavery as the war’s main cause, these soldiers wanted the government to attack the Confederacy’s cornerstone with the hope that it could bring about a speedy conclusion to the bloodshed.

The desire to destroy slavery did not simply appear when soldiers received word of the preliminary Proclamation. Increasing contact with slavery intensified these soldiers’ hatred of this institution and caused them to support the Proclamation. Historian Chandra Manning notes this phenomenon in her study of Union soldiers and that “After nearly two years of observing slavery...interacting with the slaves, and fighting a horrible war, the Union rank and file now recognized slavery as a much more insidious cancer, embedded in the very spine and sinew of the nation.”<sup>18</sup> Positive reactions to the Emancipation Proclamation must be viewed in light of soldiers’ increasing contact with slavery and runaway slaves in the Border States and the Upper South. Wayne Morris of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Michigan Infantry wrote “I hardly know what to think of the proclamation...[t]he idea of freeing the negroes, you know my mind, but if it is a ‘necessary war measure’, as Lincoln says it is. There I subscribe to it if peace is to be had in no other way.”<sup>19</sup> Morris tied his positive support for the Proclamation with his increasing contact with Southern slavery. He unabashedly supported the Proclamation from the start, placing him at the extreme positive end of Michigan soldiers’ responses on this issue. This caused Morris to identify with a group of other Michigan soldiers who were regarded by some as divisive. Writing home, Morris stated: “I hated slavery before I enlisted & God knows I hate it more & more everyday as the more I see & hear.”<sup>20</sup>

Morris went so far as to call himself an abolitionist and would remain as such “untill the curse is wiped out.”<sup>21</sup> His statement is interesting in this sample of Michigan soldiers, as many blamed the Emancipation Proclamation’s emergence on the abolitionists. Further, these soldiers cursed abolitionists for infusing their radical

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<sup>16</sup> P.A. Hager to “My Dear Wife,” November 6, 1862, microfilm edition, *Hager Family Correspondence, 1857-1887*, BHL, UM.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 85.

<sup>19</sup>Wayne Morris to wife, February 1, 1863, *Wayne E. Morris Papers, 1860-1865 and 1908*, BHL, UM.

<sup>20</sup>Wayne Morris to Parents, March 16, 1863, Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

goals into the war which, as some troopers charged, would only prolong the conflict. Over the period of one month, Morris's opinion of emancipation developed from one of military necessity to an outright hatred of slavery. Wayne Morris's encounter with slavery in the South and his subsequent identification with abolition demonstrated the impact of the institution on many Michigan soldiers.

Soldiers who supported the Proclamation understood that slavery was the root cause of the war, and saw emancipation as a war measure and a practical solution that would end this conflict. Kalamazoo native George Laurence serving in the Third Michigan Cavalry wrote:

The course pursued by the President...although under the circumstances, would not only be questionable but even adverse to the principles of the Republican party; in the present state of affairs I heartily endorse, for the very reason that the course which has been such as to forfeit to them all rights of protection whatever and the only course that is left to us, and in this rests our only hope for the restoration of our government is to push the way with the utmost vigor.<sup>22</sup>

Laurence understood that emancipation was not part of the Republican platform at the war's commencement but the situation had changed, and this forced the administration to act in light of these circumstances. Laurence viewed the Proclamation as the North's last and best hope to crush the rebellion, though under different circumstances he may not have been so supportive.

Other soldiers hoped that, with the Proclamation, Americans could put political squabbles behind them and move forward with the war. This desire to put politics aside drove many soldiers to support the edict, as it would cripple slavery and in turn seriously damage the Confederacy regardless of their defence of slavery. Once Union soldiers linked slavery's end with the war's conclusion, they began to support the Emancipation Proclamation. For example, Henry Gilbert wrote: "war cannot last forever but it must last as long as Slavery," because with its continuance, "the cause of the war exists."<sup>23</sup> These men realised that the Proclamation delivered a fatal blow to slavery from which it could not recover. Henry Potter wrote in April 1863, that "there is no use of" Copperheads and those men dodging the Conscription Act "trying to oppose the great fact that this Union will be preserved & that the Sacred Institution will suffer if it is not actually destroyed & the more they oppose this fact the more will they be left out in the cold! I can see it plainly."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>George W. Laurence to uncle, February 2, 1863, *Ness Collection*, BHL, UM.

<sup>23</sup>Henry C. Gilbert to Hattie, September 22, 1863, *Schoff Collection: Henry C. Gilbert Papers*, Box 3, WCL, UM.

<sup>24</sup>Henry Albert Potter to "Dear Folks," April 26, 1863, microfilm edition, *Henry Albert Potter Papers, 1862-1908*, BHL, UM.

James H. Kidd, who served with General Custer in the Sixth Michigan Cavalry, wrote to his father that same spring saying, "Do not allow yourself to become involved in politics. . . . Keep clear of politics entirely is my advise [sic]. Let your platform be the Union and the Constitution. The old slavery question is settled."<sup>25</sup> Slavery's elimination with the Proclamation allowed, in Kidd's view, the Northern citizenry to focus solely on bringing the war to a successful conclusion. Kidd considered slavery strictly as a political aspect of the war, and with the Proclamation, political squabbles were no longer necessary. Either one was for the Union and the Constitution or against it. There were Michigan soldiers, however, who wanted to focus on the task at hand which was Union victory. Connecting slavery's destruction with the collapse of the Confederacy was an important factor in the positive responses from soldiers regarding the Proclamation.

Wayne Morris, Michigan soldier, vigorously supported the Emancipation Proclamation in many of his letters home. One letter in particular, dated December 22, 1862, revealed his opinion of what the Proclamation could bring for the nation. He wrote "I think that time is not far distant when the glorious news shall be Heralded throughout the entire land, that the rebellion is crushed, Peace declared, & last though not least, that Slavery has received a blow, from which its death is inevitable."<sup>26</sup> Morris viewed the Proclamation as the beginning of slavery's end which would bring peace and heal the rift between the North and South therefore ending the rebellion.

According to historian Phillip Shaw Paludan, Lincoln's proposed gradual compensated emancipation and colonisation measures enabled the final Proclamation to become a "call to the freedmen to stay, to fight to sustain the Union and their freedom."<sup>27</sup> Lincoln's agenda, along with an added provision inviting African Americans to enlist in the Army gave them the opportunity to serve the Union.<sup>28</sup> This ignited a variety of complaints from Michigan soldiers, as clearly evidenced in their letters, diaries, and journals. On New Year's Day 1863, the final Emancipation Proclamation took effect and all slaves in named parts of the Confederacy became "thenceforward, and forever free."<sup>29</sup> Wayne Morris, encamped at Bowling Green, Kentucky, described the 23<sup>rd</sup> Michigan's reaction to the final proclamation: "The boys have got in possession of the President's Proclamation of January first...and most of

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<sup>25</sup>James H. Kidd letter to father, in Eric J. Wittenberg, ed., *One of Custer's Wolverines: The Civil War Letters of Brevet Brigadier General James H. Kidd, 6<sup>th</sup> Michigan Cavalry* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2000), 35.

<sup>26</sup>Wayne Morris to "Dear Wife," December 22, 1862, *Wayne E. Morris Papers*.

<sup>27</sup> Phillip Shaw Paludan, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1994), 189.

<sup>28</sup> Jim Cullen, "Gender and African American Men," in Clinton & Silber, eds. *Divided Houses*, 81. Cullen further notes that nearly 180,000 African Americans enlisted in the United Army. Although they composed less than 1 percent of the North's population, African Americans composed nearly 10 percent of the Union Army.

<sup>29</sup>"Emancipation Proclamation: January 1, 1863," in Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation*, 259.

them are highly indignant at his course 'freeing the niggers'."<sup>30</sup> In Morris's previous letters, these men were quite pleased upon hearing the news of the preliminary Proclamation only three months earlier. This change of heart may be explained as a simple question of soldier morale at the time of the final Proclamation.

While this may be the case, it is only part of the explanation. In the wake of the Fredericksburg disaster at the end of 1862, and before crucial Union victories during the summer of 1863, Michigan soldiers shared their views concerning the changed nature of the war, as well as African Americans' enlistment. While serving with the 20<sup>th</sup> Michigan Volunteers, George Ewing wrote his parents warning them about perceived dangers of emancipation and African Americans' service in the army, "the [emancipation] of the slaves...has had a tendency to warde turning a grate meny men her in ky to go and join the rebels and rayse negro ridgment to."<sup>31</sup> For Ewing, African Americans' role included manual labour, digging trenches, felling trees, and not serving with a "gun and cartridge box" within the ranks. Upon hearing about the possibility of blacks enlisting, white Union soldiers often wrote in their letters that the war should be fought solely by white men. Ewing expressed his thoughts on African Americans' role and declared that the Union should "let the white men do the fitting."<sup>32</sup>

African American soldiers, as noted by historian James McPherson, were very much "a corollary of the emancipation policy [because it] did much to change the minds of previously hostile white soldiers," as it aided the Union war effort.<sup>33</sup> The Emancipation Proclamation not only deprived the Confederate Army of their workforce, but it enabled the Union Army to acquire and place more soldiers into combat. The presence of Union soldiers in the South, particularly African American soldiers, encouraged more slaves to flee to Union lines further hindering the Confederate cause. Michigan soldier David Millspaugh wrote that African Americans would "gladly join the army" or, at the very least, "get places as cooks in the army."<sup>34</sup> As the war progressed and African American troops proved their mettle in the field, many white soldiers changed their opinions with regard to their enlistment.

To this point, Michigan soldiers had expressed various opinions about the Emancipation Proclamation. Yet, there were many soldiers who changed their opinions over time, regarding both the Proclamation and its effects. One such soldier, Edward Taylor changed his mind, writing:

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<sup>30</sup> Wayne Morris to Wife, February 1, 1863, *Wayne E. Morris Papers*.

<sup>31</sup> George Ewing to Parents, John T. Greene, ed., *The Ewing Family Civil War Letters* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 58. The Border States (Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, and Delaware) were slave states that did not secede from the Union. Fear of their secession played a key role in the shaping of Lincoln's emancipation policy during the summer of 1862.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> McPherson, *What They Fought For*, 66.

<sup>34</sup> David Millspaugh diary, January 3, 1863, BHL, UM.

I believe it was the deliberate intention of those in power to prolong the war - - until they have forced an abolition policy . . . [we] are not willing to see the negro in our ranks and do not wish to make that a test question, that we lack patriotism! . . . I speak for the whole army - - particularly the old army.<sup>35</sup>

Taylor did not view the Emancipation Proclamation as an expansion of war goals, but as a measure adopted and implemented by the Lincoln administration for the purpose of prolonging the war. When Taylor spoke of the *old army* he referred to the army during the first year and half under the beloved General McClellan. This distinction of the old army versus the new army was often made in soldiers' letters. It seems that some soldiers separated themselves from men who enlisted to preserve the Union as it was and the men who enlisted with the hope of destroying slavery. Furthermore, Taylor hinted at Lincoln having a policy of emancipation all along, that the war was not fought for the preservation of the Union, but to free the "poor oppressed negro."<sup>36</sup> Taylor did not see emancipation as a means for ending the rebellion; for him it was a distraction that prolonged the war.

Soldiers who questioned the Emancipation Proclamation often faced criticism from civilians, because they were viewed as not acting patriotically. Edward Taylor responded to those who questioned soldiers' patriotism by stating that these soldiers had enlisted to put down the rebellion and reunite the North and South. Taylor himself did not enlist to enable African Americans to participate in their own liberation. In early 1863 he considered the United States' future as being a bleak one where "the negro [came] first, our country next."<sup>37</sup> Nearly three months later, however, Taylor changed his tune when he wrote:

As for negro troops, I must say that I begin to think differently. . . I have seen distinctly negroes doing picket duty across the river here. If the 'Rebs' use them why not we? . . . Now that 'Johnny Reb' uses the negro (the thing is settled beyond dispute for negroes have been captured among their ranks and the fact of the negro soldiers is mentioned in the Richmond papers). . . In short I see no objection to using the negro as a soldier if he is properly handled.<sup>38</sup>

Taylor went further saying he had "been offered a commission in one of Gen. Danl. Ulman's new Regiments - - rank and file black - - officers white - - so far I have

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<sup>35</sup> Edward Taylor to Lottie, January 15, 1863, microfilm edition, *Edward Henry Courtney Taylor Correspondence*.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Edward Taylor to Lottie, April 1, 1863.

neither declined nor accepted. What shall I do?"<sup>39</sup> Taylor's desire for promotion could explain his change of attitude towards African American soldiers.

Whether soldiers liked it or not, the Union Army became an instrument of freedom for African Americans through the Proclamation. William Collin Stevens, who served in Company G, 3<sup>rd</sup> Michigan Cavalry, grasped this concept before the Proclamation came into effect:

I am confident that when our army leaves here there will not be in the county of New Madrid [Missouri] one tenth part the number of slaves that were here when we came, and the few that are left will soon find a way to break the chains that hold them in bondage.<sup>40</sup>

Stevens witnessed firsthand the Union Army's impact on Southern slavery and understood that freedom moved with Federal troops.

As Michigan soldiers changed their opinions about the Proclamation they came into closer, more regular contact with slavery which then altered their perceptions of African American troops. Encamped at Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Henry C. Gilbert wrote to his wife:

I broke off my writing to go out & inspect the Negro troops with Col. Utley... [t]hey are fine looking fellows & proud as Lucifer. They did look well. . . I go for Negro troops. Give us 100,000 of them. They will fight. There is no doubt of it. Oh how it does hurt the rebels & rebel sympathizers to see the Negroes around.<sup>41</sup>

Much the opposite of Ewing and in line with Taylor's changing opinion, Gilbert was quite eager to put African American troops into action, knowing how much their presence demoralised Confederate troops and Southerners in general. From this realisation Gilbert noted how within the Union Army's ranks, the "prejudice against negro troops is fast wearing away."<sup>42</sup> This raises the question as to how and why prejudice towards African American soldiers began to decline. It may have been because black troops, when afforded the opportunity, proved they were brave men up to the task of fighting rebel soldiers. Another possibility was that African American soldiers took the place of white soldiers in battle. This indicates that there were white soldiers who viewed black troops as another tool to be utilised to win the war.

The Proclamation was another important weapon for the Union as noted in early in 1863, by George Laurence who wrote, "had this course [emancipation] been

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> William Collin Stevens to "My Dear Father," April 8, 1862, microfilm edition, *William Collin Stevens Papers*, 1837-1921, BHL, UM.

<sup>41</sup> Henry C. Gilbert to "My Dear Wife," September 26, 1863, *Schoff Collection: Henry C. Gilbert Papers*, Box 3, WCL, UM.

<sup>42</sup> Henry C. Gilbert to "My Dear Hattie," September 17, 1863.

pursued at the outset I have reason to believe the war would have ended before this.”<sup>43</sup> Laurence went further in trying to understand why emancipation was not a war aim from the start. He reasoned, simply, that many Northerners did not understand how emancipation as a goal could aid the war effort during the conflict’s early years. Even if President Lincoln had attempted to issue the Emancipation Proclamation earlier, its chances of success and Northern public acceptance would have been slim. The Proclamation’s success was predicated upon the timing of when it was released. Laurence wrote:

That such a course was not adopted was not the fault of the administration...the north at that time had not been sufficiently schooled, nor did it sufficiently understand the character of the south to give the President its whole support.<sup>44</sup>

Laurence felt a broad emancipation policy from the war’s outset would have shortened the war considerably. In pragmatic fashion, Laurence realised that such a policy from the war’s beginning would have been impossible, or at least more difficult than it was in 1863. He credited the Proclamation to Lincoln and his administration and not the abolitionists.

As 1863 progressed, more soldiers realised the Proclamation’s impact and how it aided the Union war effort. Responding to a letter from a friend who expressed a hopeless vision of the Union Army’s situation during late 1863, soldier David Lane agreed, and added his reasons for hope. In August, Lane responded to the emancipation measures:

I do not forget the violent opposition to the Emancipation and Confiscation Acts. . . I remember well that reverses and disasters attended all our efforts until the government was compelled, as by an overruling Providence, to free the slaves of rebels, which includes them all; and that from the moment these measures became the fixed policy of the government, reverses ceased.<sup>45</sup>

The Proclamation, the Confiscation Acts and the Militia Act, should be given as much credit for shifting Northern momentum in the war as major Union victories on the battlefields during 1863, namely Gettysburg and Vicksburg.<sup>46</sup> Victor E. Compton, like David Lane, recognised the far-reaching implications of the Emancipation

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<sup>43</sup>George W. Laurence to uncle, February 2, 1863, *Ness Collection*, BHL, UM.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> David Lane Diary, *A Soldier’s Diary: The Story of a Volunteer, 1861-1865* (Jackson, MI: privately published by the author, 1905), 80.

<sup>46</sup> The First and Second Confiscation Acts, the Militia Act, and the D.C. Emancipation Act represented incremental emancipation measures passed by the Lincoln administration leading up to the Emancipation Proclamation.

Proclamation. A French immigrant who settled in Wayne County, Comte, served in the 5th Michigan Cavalry. Pondering the legacy of the war, he wrote to his wife in late 1863, stating "I'll also be able to say that I helped to win the liberty of several thousand of poor beings who because they happen to be black and helpless are treated as slaves." He continued, "I'll be very proud also to say that I was at Port Royal, where, the Cavalry alone forced great lines of infantry to retreat back to their fortifications. It gives one courage to think of the time in the near future when joy and happiness awaits us."<sup>47</sup> Comte understood the ramifications of Lincoln's Proclamation, especially as the Union Army began to swallow up Confederate territory and slaves were freed. Furthermore, the Proclamation helped the Union achieve victories in the field, and would prove to be a key factor in the Confederacy's surrender during April and May 1865. Victor Comte died of wounds received in battle on July 11, 1864.

By 1864, with the Emancipation Proclamation in place for a little more than a year, there were Michigan soldiers who remained convinced that African Americans were unprepared for emancipation. John Bennitt, a regimental surgeon in the 19<sup>th</sup> Michigan Infantry, wrote:

My convictions are that the Black race is inferior by nature and that if every master was a true Christian & would treat his servants as children should be treated that a condition of servitude would be better [than] for them that unconditional emancipation, without any preparation.<sup>48</sup>

While Bennitt continued to hold the view that African Americans were unprepared for freedom and military service he seems to be an exception with regard to the other Michigan soldiers used in this study. Many Michigan soldiers regarded the Proclamation, especially later in the war, as a key factor in Union victory.

At the war's conclusion, soldiers shared their understandings of the Emancipation Proclamation as an important element in bringing about Union victory. In hindsight many Michigan soldiers reflected on what the Proclamation did for the Union war effort. Hours after General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox in April 1865, James H. Kidd wrote:

So long as the Executive, the Congress and the people, stood aloof from a square toed determination to abolish slavery, we were unsuccessful and treason seemed

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<sup>47</sup> Victor E. Comte to Elise (wife), September 3, 1863, microfilm edition, *Victor E. Comte Papers*, 1853-1878, BHL, UM. The Comte letters were translated from French to English in the microfilm edition.

<sup>48</sup> John Bennitt letter March 3, 1863, Robert Beasecker, ed., *"I Hope to do My Country Service": Civil War Letters of John Bennitt, M.D., Surgeon, 19<sup>th</sup> Michigan Infantry* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 244.

promised success, but when the right was fully vindicated, the cause of the Rebellion began to decline, and has been swift to collapse.<sup>49</sup>

Until Northerners and the Federal government included slavery's abolition as a war objective, the Confederacy could prolong the bloodshed. This might have allowed for foreign intervention on the Confederacy's behalf or cause the North to sue for peace because of a public backlash.

While the number of Michigan men who expressed an opinion here regarding the Emancipation Proclamation seems small, there were many other letters in which the soldiers said nothing at all choosing silence with regard to the Proclamation. Yet, the Proclamation changed the direction of the war. It is difficult to imagine why so many remained silent. They may have been overcome by the realities of war combined with lack of education, ambivalence, political apathy, and youth. But many soldiers did share their thoughts and feelings about the Proclamation with loved ones and friends on the home front. With that, we are better able to understand their motivations to serve in the Civil War.

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# ‘Burying the Shackles’: The impact of racial violence on free black labour in the Reconstructed South (1865-1877)

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**Abstract:** *With the end of the American Civil War, the former Confederate states faced complete economic collapse when millions of plantation slaves became free. The transition from slavery to free labour was not easy for freed-people or their former owners. The struggle to define what it meant to be a free black worker was difficult in the Reconstruction South amid extreme social and racial tensions that often resulted in violent attacks on black workers. Within this evolving and often chaotic society, freed-people strove to define themselves as something other than mere plantation workers, by endeavouring to create a new free working society, distinct and independent from the one they had experienced as slaves. This article examines the way in which racially motivated violent attacks upon free black workers influenced their attempts to forge a new labouring society focussed upon independence, family, and land control.*

**Keywords:** *Reconstruction, free labour, violence, black freedom, South, freed-people*

## INTRODUCTION

During Reconstruction, changes in the Southern labour system precipitated substantial shifts in relationships between white employers, African American labourers, and plantation work. Violence against black workers was fundamental in shaping these changes. The transition from slavery to free labour following the Civil War mired Southern plantations in uncertainty and tension as it became quickly apparent that whites and blacks had fundamentally different ideas about what constituted free black work. Most plantation elites rejected the notion that black freedom meant allowing African Americans to pursue their own interests and identities. Blacks were free, but only free to work in the same way as they had always

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\* I would like to thank my anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

done.<sup>1</sup> Black labourers were vehemently challenged this social paradigm, and these diametrically opposed views brought about violent responses, as whites struggled to enact power over their workers through corporal punishment and the laws known as the Black Codes. In their response to labour violence, African American workers sought to establish their own working society, in which their labour, removed from white control, helped to advance important community values such as family, civic responsibility, and collective improvement.

Through analysing Southern free labour during Reconstruction, I acknowledge the prevalence of racial violence's, and that the evolution of freed-people's work habits is evident. However, while these features are recognised, the overall scholarship lacks an investigation into their connection. Typically, historians have acknowledged that Southern whites deliberately attempted to restrict freed-people to plantation labour, to the detriment of their involvement in other areas of public life.<sup>2</sup> One recent example is Eric Foner, who argues that white Southerners had a very limited view of black freedom, perceiving it as more a legal status, than a position of moral or civic significance. For Southern whites, Foner notes, "blacks must remain a dependent plantation labor force in a situation not very different from slavery."<sup>3</sup> Correspondingly, in his book, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, Douglas Egerton argues that this understanding was most fiercely put into practice via the legislation of the Black Codes in 1865 and 1866, which were "forged on the same legislative agenda – a determination to deny freed people access to land, and so force them back onto the plantations as low-wage laborers." This in turn barred African Americans from entering artistic, cultural, and urban work.<sup>4</sup> However, other historians have noted that as Reconstruction progressed, blacks' experience of free labour became markedly different to slave labour. Steven Hahn in *A Nation Under Our Feet*, reasons that the clearest example of this change was a relationship transformation between black workers and white employers. Hahn notes the importance of black prioritisation of family and kinship networks saying that these "served as the central weapons in their struggles to limit utter dependence and exploitation."<sup>5</sup>

While these historians have emphasised that black citizens themselves played a crucial role in instigating changes during Reconstruction upon the South's labour

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Foner, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 93.

<sup>2</sup> See: Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," in *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics From Civil War to Civil Rights*, ed. Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South From Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Foner, *Forever Free*, 93.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas R. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 178-179.

<sup>5</sup> Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 169; Peter Kolchin, *First Freedom* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), 45.

economy, this investigation will contend that racial violence in the former slave states was an important factor that drove black workers to direct their working lives away from the harsh former master-slave relationship to a more independent, self-managed free labour style. Freed-peoples' struggles to achieve this goal would in turn allow them to also attend to family and community life.<sup>6</sup> By considering first hand accounts from black workers to explore the means by which they fought against legal and social restrictions to their labour and used the powerful influence of their monopoly over plantation labour by banding together into community and family groups, I will argue that black citizens' response to labour violence drove them to achieve measures of independence within their working lives.

### THE PURPOSE AND IMPACT OF LABOUR VIOLENCE

As free labour in the South developed, white perception of African American workers had substantial influence over the new relationships between employers and their black employees. While free labour was based on the motivation to work for one's own improvement, the majority of white Southerners insisted that blacks would never work without fear of the lash. When Carl Schurz travelled across the South in 1865, he estimated that nineteen out of every twenty white Southern men he encountered held such beliefs, describing it as "the prevailing sentiment among the southern people."<sup>7</sup> Though physical punishment such as whipping was technically prohibited, many planters ignored these restrictions or found creative ways around them.<sup>8</sup> In that same year, A. Watson Webber, Commander of the U.S. forces at Columbia, Louisiana, reported, "cruel punishment of all classes and ages of colored people is indulged in to the heart's content of these enlightened and humane whites ... To them there seems to be no recourse, when a servant errs – except to the shot-gun or the lash."<sup>9</sup> An agent of the Freedmens' Bureau in Arkansas also observed similar tendencies in his region, where many planters "growl and wish to be allowed to enforce their contracts, the simple English of which is to 'whip the nigger'."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 367; Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 169.

<sup>7</sup> S. Doc. No. 39-2, Message of the President of the United States, communicating, in compliance with a resolution of the Senate of the 12th instant, information in relation to the States of the Union lately in rebellion, accompanied by a report of Carl Schurz on the states of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana; also a report of Lieutenant General Grant, on the same subject, at 16 (1865).

<sup>8</sup> George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace, The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 20-21.

<sup>9</sup> A. Watson Webber to Captain S. B. Ferguson, September 20, 1865, in Freedmen and Southern Society Project, ed. Steven F. Miller, last modified April 2015, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Webber.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> S. Doc. No. 39-27, Message of the President of the United States, communicating, in compliance with a resolution of the Senate of the 27<sup>th</sup> of February last, a communication from the Secretary of War,

Though violent punishment was not so widespread as it had been during slavery, free black workers could actually be in more danger than they had been as slaves, as now their lives held no direct monetary value for whites. Under slavery it was highly inadvisable for an owner to kill one of his slaves, such was the prohibitive nature of the cost of purchasing a new slave.<sup>11</sup> In 1865, a Bureau agent from Mississippi wrote to a colleague regarding local planters' attitudes, observing that the black American "is considered to be deserving of the same treatment a mule gets, in many cases not as kind, as it is unprofitable to kill or maim a mule, but the breaking of the neck of a free negro is nobody's loss."<sup>12</sup>

If anything, emancipation impressed upon planters a stronger need for violent control over black labour. No longer bound by legal ownership, blacks were technically free to exercise their own will, a fact which planters refused to accept. Violence became a tool with which to restrict the ability of black workers to choose their own working contracts. In February 1866, the United States Congress formed a Committee to assess Reconstruction's progress across the South. This Joint Committee on Reconstruction conducted many interviews, which included Madison Newby's testimony, an African American man from Virginia. He testified about the condition of black labourers in his state. Newby recounted an incident where a planter hung a black worker up by his thumbs, "just strong enough to hold a man's weight, so that his toes just touch the ground," after he refused a contract for a low wage. He further testified that white Virginia landholders commonly used this violent technique, and would "keep the man in that position until he agrees to do what they say. A man cannot endure it for long." Newby observed that the black citizens in his community "work if they can get anything for it; but the rebel people down there who have got lands will not let the colored people work unless they work for their prices, and they drive them away."<sup>13</sup>

Perceived breaches in etiquette or insolent acts motivated many attacks on black workers, revealing the strong desire of the planter class to reinstate the master-slave relationship. Plantation owners expected to extract the same reverence and obedience from their free black workers as they had under slavery. As a result, the most violent and vengeful attacks frequently fell upon those labourers who spoke back, disobeyed

together with the reports of the assistant commissioners of the Freedmen's Bureau made since December 1, 1865, at 28 (1866).

<sup>11</sup> Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, 204.

<sup>12</sup> S. Doc. No. 39-2, at 68 (1865).

<sup>13</sup> Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction at the First Session Thirty-Ninth Congress (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1866) 54-55.

orders, or in any way reminded employers of their free will.<sup>14</sup> Planters often wrote such expectations into labour contracts, as was the case for one unnamed Louisiana freedwoman who contracted to work for her former owner in 1865. She was bound on condition that she “be obedient to all his commands, to pay him due respect... and conduct myself as when I was owned by him as a SLAVE.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, many Southern states passed acts that permitted using corporal punishment for offenses such as “wanton impudence or disrespect to [an] employer,” which often were left to the employer to determine.<sup>16</sup> As one Bureau official observed in 1867, charges such as “that indefinable offence, ‘insolence,’ ... [are] usually considered as justifying any punishment the ‘aggrieved’ party may see proper to inflict.”<sup>17</sup> Whites could employ such charges to reinforce old slave habits and subservience, solidifying their own power and control over labour. Thus, white expectations of deference and a willingness to resort to violence obstructed African Americans from carving out a new place for themselves in the Southern workforce.

Violence against black workers was further legitimised by the introduction of the Black Codes in late 1865. Following emancipation, Southern whites were unwilling to yield their power easily, and so Southern states enacted legislation to constrain African Americans’ labour opportunities. The Black Codes were a series of legislative acts that placed severe restrictions on freedmen’s working and public lives.<sup>18</sup> Although the Codes provided some rights, including marriage and the right to engage in legal action, they incorporated provisions designed to bar African American citizens from owning or renting land, engaging in non-agricultural work, moving interstate, or changing employers.<sup>19</sup> By constraining their ability to move, work, or better their situations, the Codes served to render freed-people once again chattels to be used by whites, essentially subjecting them to white control in every aspect of their working and public lives. For instance, in Anne Arundel county, Virginia, the law dictated that a black man could not receive a license to trade “unless recommended by a certain number of respectable freeholders, (white;)” while “no white person, the partner of a negro, shall be granted a license, and if a white man employ a colored clerk, the penalty is fifty dollars.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 337-340.

<sup>15</sup> A. Watson Webber to Captain S. B. Ferguson.

<sup>16</sup> H.R. Doc. No. 39-118, Freedmen. Message from the President of the United States, in answer to a resolution of the House of 27th ultimo, relative to the provisions in the constitutions of several southern states relative to the freedmen, at 22 (1866).

<sup>17</sup> S. Doc. No. 39-6, Letter of the Secretary of War, communicating, in compliance with a resolution of the Senate of December 17, 1866, reports of the assistant commissioners of freedmen, and a synopsis of laws respecting persons of color in the late slave States, at 24 (1867).

<sup>18</sup> Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 367.

<sup>19</sup> Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, 179; Foner, *Forever Free*, 96; Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 365-366.

<sup>20</sup> S. Doc. No. 39-6, at 35 (1867).

Meanwhile, in Mississippi, it was declared that “every person may arrest and carry back to his or her legal employer any freedman, free negro, or mulatto, who shall have quit the service of his or her employer before the expiration of his or her term of service.”<sup>21</sup> Granted the legal authority to pass judgement, withhold benefits, and even physically detain black citizens, white Southerners prevented these labourers from exercising some of their most basic civil rights without white permission, thereby placing them once more under their former owners’ authority. Freed-people were vociferous in their opposition to the Codes, condemning them as contravening democratic principles, and writing numerous letters to Republican Party allies requesting political aid. In one such application, a freed-peoples’ community from South Carolina stressed their right to choose their own fate away from plantation labour, declaring “the right to enter upon all the avenues of agriculture, commerce, trade; to amass wealth by thrift and industry... cannot be questioned by any class of intelligent men.”<sup>22</sup> Such incidences highlight the importance of a non-labouring identity to the South’s fledgling black society. Yet, with resistance and independent action came violent retribution, and racial violence escalated under the Black Codes.<sup>23</sup>

The violence that occurred under the Codes was designed to reinforce black workers’ dependence upon white employers. Planters sought to strengthen the idea that blacks were not free to do as they pleased; they had to rely on the white man for their livelihoods, and as such were to abide by his rules. The Freedmen’s Bureau received numerous reports of employers who continued to whip their labourers, often without cause. If workers attempted to resist such treatment, they were commonly dismissed from the plantation. In an action taken by a Mr Newman of Gordonsville, Virginia, two black males were banned from remaining on his plantation, “unless they will agree to remain permanently with him and allow him to whip them when he thinks proper.”<sup>24</sup> Recalcitrant planters commonly used violence, or the threat of it, to discourage workers from leaving their plantations and seeking out places where they may receive vastly better wages. In 1867, the Assistant Commissioner for the Freedmen’s Bureau in Georgia reported how “every possible expedient was resorted to for frightening and keeping [freed-people] at home, in order to enable employers to hire them at shamefully inadequate wages.”<sup>25</sup>

Planters also rejected their employees’ right to choose their own work. In 1866 the Bureau reported an incident where a South Carolina planter presented his workers

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<sup>21</sup> H.R. Doc. No. 39-118, at 27 (1866).

<sup>22</sup> “Memorial to the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States in Congress Assembled: Proceedings of Colored People’s Convention of South Carolina,” appendix to James S. Allen, *Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy, 1865-1876* (New York: International Publishers, 1937), 229.

<sup>23</sup> Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, 184.

<sup>24</sup> “Cases Adjudicated by the Freedmen’s Bureau Superintendent at Gordonsville, Virginia, 1865,” in *Freedmen and Southern Society Project*, ed. Steven F. Miller, last modified April 2015, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Gordonsville%20reg.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> S. Doc. No. 39-6, at 50 (1867).

with a lifetime contract. When they refused to sign, they were driven away without payment for work already completed. Two armed men pursued the workers, and murdered two of them. They also whipped another, before returning with her and imprisoning her on the plantation.<sup>26</sup> This treatment left blacks helpless and angered at the injustice of their state. A freed-people's committee on Edisto Island, South Carolina, described the effect that their helplessness had upon their working lives and their relationships with their white employers:

From the homes we have lived in in the past we can only do one of three things: step into the public road or the sea, or remain on them working as in former time and subject to thine will as then. We can not resist it in any way without being driven out homeless upon the road. You will see this is not the condition of really free men... You ask us to forgive the land owners of our Island. *You* only lost your right arm in war and might forgive them. The man who tied me to a tree and gave me 39 lashes and who stripped and flogged my mother and my sister and who will not let me stay in his empty hut except I will do his planting and be satisfied with his price... that man, I cannot well forgive.<sup>27</sup>

So long as their labour was subject entirely to white employers' whims, African American workers would remain subjugated and inferior. Thus, black labourers began to formulate practical ideas about how they wished to participate in the Southern plantation economy. In 1867, with the federal abolition of the Black Codes, freed-people began to introduce small but significant changes to their working lives.

#### THE WORK OF FREED-PEOPLE: CONSTRUCTING A NEW STYLE OF LABOUR

Freed-people believed steadfastly that freedom should be radically different to slavery. When asked to state their understanding of what slavery and freedom meant, an African American ministers' delegation from Savannah, Georgia, in 1865 answered, "slavery is receiving by *irresistible power* the work of another man, and not by his *consent*." Then delegation continued that freedom "is taking us from under the yoke of bondage, and placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor...[and] take care of ourselves."<sup>28</sup> Freed-people recognised independence from white direction and control as essential to achieving and maintaining free labour: while they were content

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<sup>26</sup> S. Doc. No. 39-27, at 21-22 (1866).

<sup>27</sup> Committee of Freedmen on Edisto Island, South Carolina, to General O. O. Howard, October 20 or 21, 1865, in Freedmen and Southern Society Project, ed. Steven F. Miller, last modified April 2015, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Edisto%20petitions.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> "Minutes of an Interview Between the Colored Ministers and Church Officers at Savannah with the Secretary of War and Major-Gen. Sherman," *New-York Daily Tribune*, February 13, 1865.

to work *with* whites towards common goals, they could not construct themselves as a free labouring society if they remained controlled by white employers.

African Americans therefore began to resist their employers' control by banding together to set their own working hours and pace, and allocating free time and Sunday rest days in an attempt to determine the nature of their own work and express their freedom.<sup>29</sup> Though only small steps towards independence, these changes encouraged black cooperation and collective action, as one man alone may have had little influence over an employer, but a community of workers held greater sway. Many employers, however, saw these traits as indicative of black laziness, arguing that this condition demonstrated that blacks did indeed require physical pain to work. In 1865, a Bureau Chairman in South Carolina observed that many planters complained that "nearly all [workers] have shortened their day's work several hours, and persist in taking to themselves every Sunday," while insisting that "only actual suffering, starvation, and punishment will drive many of them to work."<sup>30</sup> African Americans were not ready to give up their struggle for freedom within the working sphere. Although violence discouraged outright disobedience, freed-people retained one of the most basic elements of their emancipation – the ability to labour where and for whom they chose.<sup>31</sup> By retaining this crucial piece of power within the Southern labour economy, black workers prevented their white employers from obtaining total control over the South's labour market.

As Reconstruction continued, African Americans developed a more concrete understanding about the role labour would play in their lives. Contrary to white Northerners' expectations, former slaves did not view their work merely as a way to improve their individual standing in life. Rather, their labour became a means to prove their worth as citizens, and a gateway into other areas of public life. In 1871, the South Carolina Convention of Colored People declared that "while we have, as a body, contributed our labor in the past to enhance the wealth and promote the welfare of the community, we have, as a class, been deprived of the... return that civilization makes for the labor of the individual."<sup>32</sup> Black workers were not simply interested in material profit for their labour, but in being recognised as contributing members of society, with interests and goals beyond agriculture. They emphasised a specific understanding of what it meant to be a citizen: that rights of citizenship were not blithely granted but were earned in exchange for fulfilling civic duties.

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<sup>29</sup> Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 45; Harold Woodman, "The Reconstruction of the Cotton Plantation in the New South," in *Essays on the Postbellum Southern Economy*, eds Thavolia Glymph and John J. Kushma (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), 102.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Soule to General O. O. Howard, June 12, 1865, in *Freedmen and Southern Society Project*, ed. Steven F. Miller, last modified April 2015, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Soule.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 372-373.

<sup>32</sup> "The Convention of Colored Citizens," *Weekly Louisianian*, November 19, 1871.

In 1866, an anonymous letter to the *Colored American*, expressed disappointment at the extent to which many whites mistrusted African Americans' character and insisted that "We will show by our conduct that we are worthy of being American citizens. By our *acts* we will give the *lie* to our calumniators."<sup>33</sup> A similar sentiment was expressed by a group of Tennessee freedmen, who wrote to the Bureau in 1865, to request "that we may be secured as others, in the just fruits of our toil: protected from unjust and illegal punishments, and we are sure we will keep our families from want, and do our part as good citizens of the United States."<sup>34</sup> Emphasizing the duties inherent to citizenship reflected African Americans' unique understanding of the term. While former Confederates recognised that democracy was founded on a balance of rights and responsibilities, they saw citizenship as an inherent liberty granted only to American-born white men.<sup>35</sup> Basing their understanding of citizenship upon the notion of responsibility, black workers sought to create a civic ideal from which they would not be automatically excluded.

The changes in labour patterns implemented by African American workers during the late 1860s and 1870s were slight, yet proved to be important in defining labour's role within black society. The mutual dependence between planters and workers was an undeniable fact of free labour, and neither could succeed without the involvement of the other.<sup>36</sup> Once both blacks and whites became aware of this reality, it became far more difficult for planters to exploit their workers without loss of profits. A black newspaper editor observed in 1869 that planters were

... beginning to wake up to the fact that they are dependant on the blacks as well as the blacks on them... We trust these dainty gentlemen will now learn an important lesson in political economy... Especially where Capital employs six-shooters to enforce its demands, will Labor become restive and turbulent, certainly intensely migratory.<sup>37</sup>

Following the passage of the Congressional Reconstruction Act in late 1866, which preceded the end of Black Codes, those employers who treated their freed-people poorly struggled to find labourers for the coming season. Black labourers chose not to work for whites who attempted to enforce strict rule over their workers. In a report printed in the *Loyal Georgian*, it was observed that "those planters who ill treated the freedmen last year, find it almost impossible to secure labor during this, and some

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<sup>33</sup> "Self-Respect," *Colored American*, January 6, 1866.

<sup>34</sup> Reverend Lewis Bright, et al. to General Clinton B. Fisk, July 27, 1865, in *Freedmen and Southern Society Project*, ed. Steven F. Miller, last modified April 2015, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Bright.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 218.

<sup>36</sup> Rable, *But There Was No Peace*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> "Mutual Dependence," *New Orleans Tribune*, February 11, 1869.

have been compelled to abandon their farms in consequence.”<sup>38</sup> Labourers were now mindful of the power their labour afforded them: they resisted to white violence and intimidation, and began to instigate changes within the plantation system.

The first of these plantation changes established a greater distance between black workers and their employers in their daily work. One of the most fundamental differences between slave and free labour was in how labourers perceived themselves in relation to their white employers.<sup>39</sup> Black workers no longer tolerated their employers scrutinising their every move. An anonymous former Georgian plantation worker recalled that following an unpleasant change to working conditions, “We free laborers held a meeting. We all wanted to quit. We sent a man to tell [the planter] about it.”<sup>40</sup> By congregating and forming a collective position from which to negotiate with their employers, black workers sought to empower themselves within the employer-employee relationship, and establish a communal independence from whites.

This desire for independence was also demonstrated in black labourers’ tendency towards taking up sharecropping over wage labour. In theory, sharecropping allowed labourers more control over their work, enabling them to work with, instead of for, the landowner to obtain the best harvest from the crop.<sup>41</sup> J.W. Alford observed in a letter to General Major Howard of the Freedmen’s Bureau in 1870 that “the freedmen are buying or renting land and raising their own crops,” and declared this development to be an indication “of the drift of these people towards independent homelife and profitable labor.”<sup>42</sup> In reality, however, sharecropping was a dangerous and damaging practice, and tenants rarely farmed enough to repay their landowners the cost of their tenancy, driving black families deeper into debt and dependence.<sup>43</sup>

However, black workers tended to favour this manner of arrangement indicating their desire to reap the benefits of their own work. Richard H. Cain, a black representative to the South Carolina Constitutional Convention of 1868, noted that this relationship, in which labourers worked more for themselves than for white employers, “inspire[d] every [black] man with a noble manfulness, and by the thought that he is possessor of something in the State.”<sup>44</sup> In seeking to obtain a more distant,

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<sup>38</sup> “Progress of Reconstruction,” *Loyal Georgian*, March 3, 1866.

<sup>39</sup> Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 338.

<sup>40</sup> “The New Slavery In The South – An Autobiography,” *The Independent*, February 25, 1904.

<sup>41</sup> Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 42.

<sup>42</sup> J. W. Alford, “Letters from the South relating to the condition of the Freedmen, addressed to General Major O. O. Howard” (1870), in *Economic Co-operation among Negro Americans*, ed. W.E.B. Du Bois (Atlanta: University of Atlanta Press, 1970), 44.

<sup>43</sup> Ellison, *The Black Experience*, 12.

<sup>44</sup> *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of South Carolina, Held at Charleston, S.C., beginning January 14<sup>th</sup> and ending March 17<sup>th</sup>, 1868, Including the Debates and Proceedings* (Charleston, S.C.: Denny A. Perry, 1868), 420.

balanced relationship with their employers, black workers demonstrated the importance they placed on the emerging black working society's independence.

African American workers made other significant changes to the conduct of their labour, particularly in terms of living conditions and family relationships. In the late 1860s, plantation workers implemented a transition from communal, slave-style living, to family-based living in individual dwellings.<sup>45</sup> Following his marriage to one of the house servants, a Georgian plantation worker moved with his wife into a two-room cabin on the plantation, while other workers each lived in their own one-room dwellings.<sup>46</sup> This transition was accompanied by a gradual shift from gang labour, controlled over by an overseer, to a system in which small areas of land were allotted to tenant or sharecropper families.<sup>47</sup> Living and working in family groups afforded freed-people greater protection and solidarity against white influence.<sup>48</sup> As this style of labour developed, arrangements for plantation amenities such as tools, food, and supplies were made with individual families, bringing opportunity for families to gain greater control over both their living and working conditions.<sup>49</sup>

Likewise, many freed-families attempted to remove black women and children from the tough plantation work force. While numerous planters condemned this action as laziness, it actually embodied a broader reorganization of family and work life, aimed at curtailing employers' power over any one family and allowed the family to develop other interests and identities beyond their working lives. Freed-people valued family and the care of loved ones very highly. Contrary to the traditional white American ideal of free labour, black workers saw themselves as striving not only for their own improvement, but for their whole family's advancement, among whom labour's profits would be shared equally.<sup>50</sup> A Georgian freed-people's group wrote to the Bureau in 1865, deploring planters who "only will... take the prime hands, and our old and infirm, mothers and fathers, and our children, will not be provided for... we cannot labor for the land owners and know that our infirm and children are not provided for."<sup>51</sup> Though black families remained essentially subject to the white landowners for whom they worked, freed-people's efforts to provide for and protect

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<sup>45</sup> Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 46; Woodman, "The Reconstruction of the Cotton Plantation in the New South," 110.

<sup>46</sup> "The New Slavery In The South – An Autobiography."

<sup>47</sup> Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeomen Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 154-155.

<sup>48</sup> Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 169.

<sup>49</sup> Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism*, 173.

<sup>50</sup> Sharon Ann Holt, "Symbol, Memory, and Service: Resistance and Family Formation in Nineteenth-Century African America," in *Working Towards Freedom: Slave Society and Domestic Economy in the American South*, ed. Larry E. Hudson (New York: University of Rochester Press, 1994), 205.

<sup>51</sup> "Freedmen of Liberty County, Georgia, to Colonel H. F. Sickles, November 28, 1865", in *Freedmen and Southern Society Project*, ed. Steven F. Miller, last modified, April 2015, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Golden.htm>.

their families from white influence indicated a collective solidarity that formed the fundamental tenet for the black community.

Black workers retained one dream that they insisted was vital to their freedom: to own their own land. After the war, rumours began to spread among Southern blacks that the majority of the plantation land belonging to their former owners would be divided up and distributed among the freed-people.<sup>52</sup> Under President Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction edicts, however, almost all of this land was restored to white planters within a few months of war's end.<sup>53</sup> Many black workers held on to these hopes until the end of 1865, but they were bitterly disappointed. In a petition to the Freedmen's Bureau Commissioner, the freed-people of Edisto Island, South Carolina, declared, "General, we want Homesteads, we were promised Homesteads by the government. If it does not carry out the promise its agents made to us... we are left in a more unpleasant condition than our former."<sup>54</sup> Newly emancipated, with almost no material wealth, black labourers stood little chance of earning enough money in their lifetimes to purchase land without government aid. African Americans recognised that, as long as the whites owned the land on which they depended for their livelihood, they could never truly be masters of their own fate, or class themselves as true American citizens.

Black workers continued to petition the government for the opportunity to obtain land. In 1865, one committee of Virginia freed-people adopted the resolutions that, "we feel it be very important that we obtain HOMES – owning our shelters, *and the ground*, that we may raise fruit trees, concerning which our children can say – '*These are ours*'."<sup>55</sup> The desire to acquire land reflected a strong drive to build a communal legacy and construct a foundation upon which black families could form their own identities, histories, and place upon the wider American stage. For freed-people, having once been chattels themselves, property ownership represented a new platform of American citizenship. By 1870, however, only thirty thousand black Southerners owned small plots of land, with four million still dependent on white landowners.<sup>56</sup> While African Americans did not manage to obtain complete labour independence from whites, they were able to influence some significant changes within the plantation labour system, demonstrating their strong drive for independence, as well as their focus on kinship and community.

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<sup>52</sup> Randall M. Miller, "Introduction," in *The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations*, ed. Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999), xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>53</sup> Andrew Johnson was US President between 1865 and 1868; Foner, *Forever Free*, 76.

<sup>54</sup> Committee of Freedmen on Edisto Island, South Carolina, to General O. O. Howard.

<sup>55</sup> "Joseph R. Johnson to General O. O. Howard, August 4, 1865," in *Freedmen and Southern Societies Project*, ed. Steven F. Miller, last modified April 2015, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/J%20Johnson.htm>.

<sup>56</sup> Foner, *Forever Free*, 81.

## CONCLUSION

Over the course of Reconstruction, white planters and overseers used violence against the African American labouring class as a means to maintain their control over this labour, discourage black autonomy, and limit blacks' ability to exercise their new found rights. As former slaves became more accustomed to life as freed-people, however, the planter class' violence and legislative oppression drove them to use their limited influence to implement changes to their working style. By distancing themselves from their white employers, choosing to live and work in family groups rather than labour-gangs, and adopting mainly sharecropping and tenancy agreements, black workers sought to actively dissociate themselves from the features of their former lives as slaves. Although the persistence of many whites to control the Southern labour economy left black families mired in debt, African American workers' actions in response to violence reflected their sincere desire to establish a working community in which each citizen could labour independently for their families' and society's benefit. However, the Southern plantation workforce during Reconstruction remained a harsh and unforgiving environment for blacks. To remedy this, African American eyes increasingly turned towards the power of politics, as they realised that true independence could come only with the right to vote.

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## Book Reviews

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### **America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation**

David Goldfield

New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011. Hardcover; 632 pages; 14 colour illustrations; RRP \$70.00; ISBN: 978-1-59691-702-6

Can anyone say anything new about the American Civil War? As the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of this conflict continue, could this be the time for a new perspective, about its origins, its key stories and its aftermath? David Goldfield acknowledges the existing wealth of scholarly texts on the Civil War, but puts forward an interesting exploration of the antebellum period (1820-1877) in the United States in his book *America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation*. As a new insight into how sectional divisions developed and reached boiling point, Goldfield carefully explains his work covering this contentious period of American history. He relates the events which led to a bloody domestic war and brings the period to a close with peace conditional upon the reinterpretation of an American identity and nation. His re-telling of events is concerned with “how we [Americans] got into the war, how the war transformed the men who fought, and how America came out of the war.” In fact, Goldfield hopes that his “treatment of the war’s origins, the conflict itself, and its aftermath will enable readers to view the Civil War from a new perspective” (p. 1).

Having studied the Civil War for many years now, I found Goldfield’s work to be refreshing as he presented the complex concepts of this period in easy to understand language. He does not assume that the reader is in possession of a wide knowledge of this crucial time in American history: instead, Goldfield carefully deconstructs these ideas in such a way that I was reminded of how I first learnt this fascinating history. One of these concepts is the American idea of freedom, and Goldfield explains how the United States had been founded on the beliefs of independence and liberty, ideals which were not readily found in the European monarchies. He notes how this Revolutionary and republican legacy was a deeply rooted mindset, where “America was still an experiment, a lonely outpost of democratic government in a world dominated by autocracy and littered with failed attempts at self government” (p. 4).

Another of these important themes which Goldfield brings to the fore is how this central tenant of freedom was a contested notion well before the Civil War’s first shots were fired at Fort Sumter, South Carolina on April 12, 1861. He specifically looks at how Northerners and Southerners held differing and highly competing notions of their freedom and what constituted being an American. For those Americans living in what were known as the Northern *Free States*, freedom was to be realised through one’s own

labour as this allowed the individual to acquire enough wealth to commence his own business and employ other free white male labourers. Through this process a white man in the North could rise to the highest level of society to count himself amongst the elite. For Southerners, however, freedom and social advancement could only be obtained through the ownership and accumulation of black slaves. The more slaves a white man possessed, the higher his social status. Yet, as the 1850s drew to a close and the anti-slavery Republican Party seemed on the verge of claiming the Federal government in 1860, these sectional differences could no longer be negotiated to maintain the status quo of two opposite socio-economic systems within the one nation. Goldfield highlights this tension and misunderstanding saying, "Slavery lay at the core of these differences" as Southerners considered it to be "a divinely sanctioned institution" while northerners saw it as "a damning sin" (p. 192).

For most people not entirely familiar with the American Civil War, this conflict resulted because of either slavery's brutality upon black people in bondage, or was born out of the North's desire to free the slave and abolish this institution. But the Civil War was not initially about freeing black people from slavery; it was about freeing white people from the dependence on slavery or white people leaving the work to others rather than socially advancing from their own free labour. Or as Goldfield explained, "Southern whites, in denying freedom for the black man, now threatened freedom for" all white Americans (p. 26). It needs to be kept in mind that under systems of both free labour and slavery African Americans had no place except to hold up the social ladder by occupying the lowest rung. So as Goldfield argues, the Civil War was over the competing ideas and interpretations of American freedom.

Goldfield's *America Aflame* makes a valuable contribution to the existing American Civil War scholarship during the 150<sup>th</sup> celebrations of this defining event in US history. Goldfield offers readers a wonderful opportunity to learn about the Civil War in ways that are easily understood. I recommend this book to both beginners and more advanced students of the American Civil War.

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### **In Hospital and Camp: The Civil War Through the Eyes of its Doctors and Nurses**

Harold Elk Straubing

Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2014. Paperback; 176 pages; RRP \$19.95; ISBN: 978-0-8117-0138-9

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we accept that death from common diseases such as measles is extremely rare. We expect, and demand, that our medicos administer proper pain relief when necessary, and prescribe antibiotics and other miracle drugs to stop minor infections from developing into raging sepsis that can ravage and kill. We hope they will medi-vac us to hospital when we fall in remote locations. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we take for granted the medical expertise and the technological marvels of the modern emergency room. This compilation of the recollections of ten physicians, nurses and medics takes us into the medical arena of the Civil War, where shot and shell brought disfigurement and death, where even the strongest warriors succumbed to infection, and where disease spread like wildfire through encampments. It gives us a brief glimpse into not only medical practice in the field and in hospitals, but also into the men and women who served as doctors and nurses and who were often ill-prepared for the rigours of tending the wounded.

Three of the selections are literary pieces - by Louisa May Alcott, Walt Whitman, and Frederick Law - while there are five reports by surgeons from both the Union and the Confederacy and two items from volunteer nurses. All have appeared in print before. The accounts range from the horrifying clinical surgical notes of a doctor to the forthright concerns of a dedicated nurse and even include some lyric lines from Walt Whitman. There is also the account of a young volunteer on her first day as a nurse who published her account in 1869. The title of Straubing's compilation has borrowed from her work, *In Hospital and Field*. Straubing's introduction offers the reader a brief but informative background to the hardships medical personnel faced and the conditions under which they laboured, with limited experience and lack of equipment. (Who knew there were only 600 thermometers for the entire Union forces?) Brief introductions to the selections give context but are not weighed down with unnecessary details, while the bibliography directs the reader to further material for those who would seek to learn more.

While there are many first-person accounts of the Civil War, with seemingly more published every year, these ten pieces have been judiciously selected to provide the reader with insight concerning the fear and the agony of the sick and wounded together with the despair of those attempting to preserve lives under horrendous conditions. This publication gives a taste of Civil War history that is sometimes overshadowed by political and military tomes, and shows the human toll of battles fought in the mud and blood, and where men fell under a hail of shot and shell. It gives a voice to those who worked so hard to save them.

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